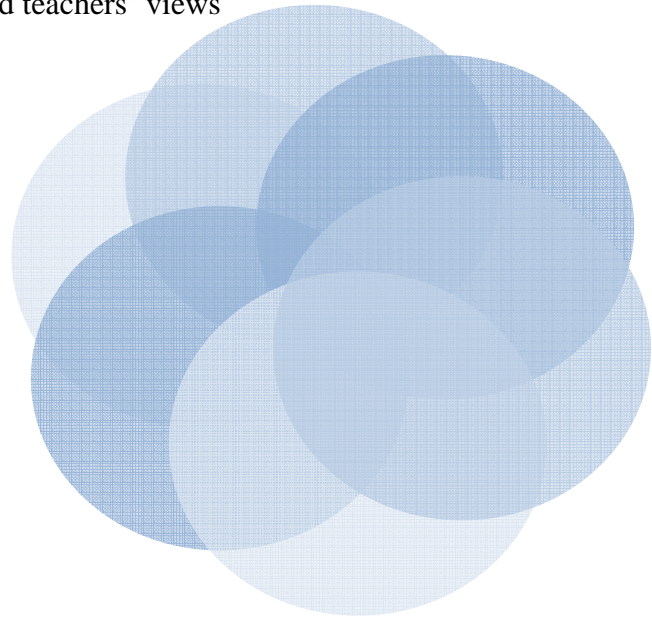


# Parent Involvement in the Peel District School Board

A study of parents', principals', and teachers' views

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**June 2010**



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## Acknowledgements

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## Executive Summary

### Background and Purpose

This study on parent involvement in Peel District School Board ((PDSB) was first commissioned by the Board's Parent Involvement Committee in the fall of 2008. The first stage of this study, which consisted of focus groups with parents and principals, was reported in August 2009. This second report incorporates the findings of Stage 2, which comprised teacher focus groups and a teacher survey. The teacher focus groups provided detailed responses to the findings of Stage 1 and the teacher survey provided broad representation. PDSB Communications staff and the Parent Involvement Committee participated in preparing the recommendations.

### Conclusion Highlights

1. Parents in Peel Region are most engaged in first three of Epstein's (1995) six types of involvement: parenting, assisting student learning, and communication with the school. Teachers value these types of involvement very highly. This result suggests a good match between what teachers expect and what parents can typically provide.
2. Parents typically consider themselves to be involved with their children's education. The most common kind of involvement is daily follow up: asking children about their day at school, reading over agendas, ensuring homework is done, and generally monitoring their children's progress. Teachers recognise the efforts of many parents, especially in the lower grade levels. At the same time, teachers say that some parents are not involved or are inappropriately involved. Inappropriate involvement includes completing homework for the child, making excuses for the child, and not supporting the teacher when problems arise.
3. Assisting with homework is very common and many parents like to help. However, the nature and the amount of homework is controversial with parents and some find it difficult to assist. Teachers value parents' help with homework but emphasize that parents must stop short of doing the homework themselves, a problem they encounter with some families. Teachers see the role of textbooks as a specific area where parents need to be educated.
4. Principals also seek to encourage the other three types of parent involvement: volunteering, school decision-making and advocacy, and involvement with the community (Epstein, 1995). Many parents are involved in these three ways. However, there are challenges for newcomers to become involved in these ways including language issues, lack of confidence to initiate discussions, and confusion about what involvement is expected in Canada. Fortunately, teachers are aware of parents' limitations in being able to spend time in the schools. They also recognize that older children discourage their parents' presence there. Teachers see the value of strategies specifically designed to encourage newcomers to feel comfortable in the schools.

5. The importance of communication was reflected throughout the findings. Parents and principals both identified communication between home and school as a crucial aspect of parent involvement. Typically the key point of contact is the teacher. Teachers greatly value communication with parents, naming personal conversations as by far their best personal strategy to encourage parent involvement. However, while teachers highly value attendance at parent-teacher interviews, parents are often frustrated by these brief meetings.
6. Principals make communication with parents a priority, particularly in the lower grades, and generally parents are pleased with communication they receive. Some parents feel they do not receive enough information from the school and newcomers especially may find it difficult to initiate communication with the school. On the other hand, while making considerable effort at communicating with parents, teachers are sometimes disappointed by a defensive response.
7. Principals said many families are experiencing other barriers to involvement such as more poverty, poorer nutrition, and more social problems. They are seeing more children with special needs than in the past. They also see parents being busier than ever before. Teachers feel that there is less parent involvement than in the past, largely as a result of parents being very busy. They want to see parents making their child's education a priority no matter how busy they are.
8. Principals feel that settlement workers provide a very important personal service that encourages a trusting relationship with the school. Parents' references to settlement workers support this view. Teachers agree that settlement workers are invaluable in educating parents on the school system.
9. While parents usually feel well connected to the school in the early grades, this sense of connection decreases in later grades. In addition, children often don't talk to their parents about school. Teachers also feel that parent involvement decreases with older children. They would like to see it continue in higher grades and shift in nature to supporting greater self responsibility.
10. To enhance communication, principals try very hard to make parents feel welcome in the schools, and most parents feel welcome, with few exceptions. All staff, from the office staff to the teacher to the principal, can affect how much parents feel their involvement is wanted. Parents and principals agree that positive events such as parent conferences, information sessions, children's performances, and parent-child activities are very important to encouraging involvement. Teachers recognise that some parents feel intimidated and some go out of their way to make parents feel more comfortable. They feel that administrators and other school staff also have a strong role in creating a welcoming atmosphere.
11. The majority of teachers have received some kind of support in encouraging parent involvement, most commonly a school wide strategy or written information. Teachers

expressed a preference for support via these two methods, as well as a desire for PD workshops on parent involvement.

12. Reasons for calling home vary but generally teachers call home in response to concerns such as student absence or misbehaviour. On the other hand, some teachers stressed the need to contact parents for positive reasons, setting an encouraging tone for future communication. On the survey, some teachers cited 'good news' phone calls as their personal best strategy for encouraging parent involvement. As some parents may feel intimidated by school, a policy of "positive first" personal contact may be fruitful in encouraging involvement of these parents.

### **Recommendations for PDSB Communications and Parent Involvement Committee**

1. Parents' efforts at home to monitor and support their children's learning, despite multiple challenges, should be valued and recognized as the chief form of involvement that parents themselves value and are most able to achieve. Along with this recognition, information about the benefits and the broad spectrum of parent involvement (Epstein's six types) would help raise parents' awareness of what is possible and show acceptance of diverse ways of being involved.
2. Ongoing communication, particularly between parents and teachers, should remain a priority for schools. It is important for educators to acknowledge that parents feel less connected to the school as their children advance and to help parents understand how they can best remain involved.
3. Parents require help and resources on how to communicate with children who may be reticent about school.
4. To encourage involvement of all kinds, educators need to communicate their expectations clearly to parents. Newcomers especially need considerable encouragement and accommodation to help them overcome barriers including language issues, lack of confidence to initiate discussions, and confusion about what involvement is expected in Canada. Collaboration between the Board and community groups could facilitate communication with parents.
5. Parents, especially newcomers, need a very strong welcome from the schools at all points of contact. All staff, including office staff, teachers and principals, can affect how much parents feel their involvement is wanted.
6. A strong settlement worker program is important to newcomer parent involvement and should be maintained and perhaps expanded.
7. Parents need help to understand how teachers implement the curriculum with their teaching methods and learn complementary ways of helping with homework.

8. Educators should continue creatively planning events that help parents feel comfortable and welcome in the school. The numerous successful strategies listed in this report should be compiled and shared with all educators
9. School wide strategies to encourage parent involvement should continue and perhaps be expanded. Development of other types of support such as written information and training may be in order.
10. Teachers' efforts to set a positive tone through personal conversation should be continued and supported through a general policy of "positive first" personal communication.

## Introduction

A considerable amount of education research over the years (summarized by the Michigan Department of Education, 2001) has shown that parent involvement is the most accurate predictor of student achievement and is a more important factor in children's school success than socio-economic status (Henderson & Berle, 1994).

This study on parent involvement in Peel District School Board ((PDSB) was first commissioned by the Board's Parent Involvement Committee in the fall of 2008. The first stage of this study, which consisted of focus groups with parents and principals, was reported in August 2009. This second report incorporates the findings of Stage 2, which comprised teacher focus groups and a teacher survey. The teacher focus groups provided detailed responses to the findings of Stage 1 and the teacher survey provided broad representation. The survey questions were based mainly on parent, principal, and teacher focus group findings.

Families can be involved in a number of ways, ranging from support of the child as a learner at home to public advocacy. Based on a large body of research, Epstein (1995) defined six types of parent involvement that have become well known as a guide for parent involvement efforts. The US National PTA 's Standards for Parent Involvement Programs (2000) further developed these types. Listed below, the types informed the interpretation of the findings of this PDSB study.

1. Communicating - Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. Parenting – home environments support children as students.
3. Student Learning - Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. Volunteering- Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
5. School Decision Making and Advocacy -Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. Collaborating with Community - Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

## Methodology

In the focus groups, parents were asked their definition and their manner of their involvement, barriers to involvement, feelings about school, and ways to encourage involvement (See Appendix A). Principals and teachers were asked their definition of involvement, trends they perceive among families, barriers to involvement, and strategies they have used to encourage involvement (See Appendix B and C). The teacher survey contained similar questions and was conducted online using Survey Monkey (See Appendix D).

## Sampling and Recruitment

### *Parent Focus Groups*

In order to achieve broad representation, eighteen focus groups were held with parents. Parents of children at all grade levels were included and broad geographic representation was achieved.

It was quite common for parents to have two or more children at different grade levels, allowing them to make comparisons between junior, middle, and secondary levels. To ensure that the diversity of Peel Region was represented and that newcomers (142 in total) were accommodated, twelve of the focus groups were conducted in languages other than English. Two were conducted in each of the following languages: Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, Mandarin, Tamil, and Urdu. Available resources did not allow for groups to be conducted in all languages parents might speak in Peel Region.

The remaining six parent focus groups (42 parents in total) were conducted in English. Not surprisingly, given the make-up of Peel Region's population, a large proportion parents in the English language groups identified themselves as immigrants.

Parents in the English language groups were recruited by sending invitations to randomly selected parents in schools chosen strategically for grade level, geographic, and socio-economic representation. A different method was required to recruit parents for non-English groups. In this case, settlement workers invited parents known to speak the language that could be offered. As well as recruiting participants, settlement workers moderated and transcribed/translated the non-English focus groups for analysis. During a debriefing session, their insights were recorded and these are included in this report.

### ***Principals' Focus Groups***

Three focus groups were conducted with principals (total of 28) of elementary/junior schools, elementary/middle schools, and secondary schools. Principals were recruited through the Principals' Association by a broadcast invitation to participate. Three focus groups were conducted with those who volunteered: a) ten principals of elementary/junior schools, b) nine from elementary/middle schools, and c) nine from secondary schools.

### ***Teacher Focus Groups***

An invitation was sent to all teachers in the Board (approximately 12000). Teachers who responded to the invitation were divided into six focus groups, two for each level: early, middle and secondary grades. A total of 41 teachers and one teacher's aide took part, with good representation across the grades.

### ***Teacher Survey***

An invitation to participate in the online survey was emailed to all teachers in the PDSB. Participants were required to go to the internet site via a link provided in the email. The survey took approximately ten to fifteen minutes for respondents to complete and was hosted by SurveyMonkey.com. The response rate was approximately 9%. Teachers across all grade levels, K-12, and in all three areas of the board, Mississauga, Caledon and Brampton participated. The survey opened on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2010 and closed on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2010. 1126 respondents accessed the survey during this time period, of which 979 completed the entire survey and 72 partially completed it.

## **Limitations**

Findings from focus groups provide excellent detail but are limited in their generalizability. Thus, in spite of measures to achieve broad representation, participants' views may not represent parents' and principals' and teachers' views in general across the Board.

The survey response rate of 9% produced a sample size large enough to describe findings on teachers' thoughts and opinions on parent involvement across the school board. However the results may not be representative of all teachers across all grade levels.

## **Summaries of Findings**

For the reader's convenience, the findings are first presented in summary form in five sections:

1. Parent focus groups
2. Insights from the settlement workers who conducted focus groups
3. Principals' Focus Groups
4. Teacher Focus Groups and survey comments
5. Teacher Survey

The summaries are followed by detailed reports, with quotations. Findings from the English and non-English parent group are reported together because the themes were largely similar. Any notable variations in themes between these two groups are mentioned and illustrated with quotations. Differences noted by immigrants between the Ontario education system and that of their homeland are reported near the beginning as they are fundamental to many of the themes that follow. Note that the term 'newcomer' is used to refer to relatively recent immigrants.

For the focus group findings, themes are presented in order of relative strength. However, it is important to note that focus group discussions do not yield exact frequencies of themes; therefore, the ordering merely provides a rough indication of relative importance. Open-ended survey comments are reported together with the teacher focus groups. This method analysis was used because the survey comments followed the same themes and combining them gives a better sense of the emphasis placed on each theme by teachers over all.

## **Summary of Parent Focus Groups**

### ***How Parents Feel About Involvement***

In all focus groups, participants stressed the importance of parental involvement in children's education. Parents typically expressed eagerness and a sense of responsibility to support their children's learning. Many parents, especially those in the non-English groups, expressed gratitude to PDSB for the opportunity to participate in the focus groups and hoped further similar opportunities for involvement would arise.

### ***How Parents are Involved in Their Child's Education***

Parents indicated a variety of ways in which they feel actively involved. By far the most common type of involvement consists of daily follow up on school activities. Typically parents said they do this even if they have no other involvement. While daily follow up is incorporated into family routine, parents often offer support and encouragement to their children in response to specific circumstances. For issues such as choosing careers and dealing with social concerns, parents consider the support they offer to be an essential component in involvement beyond routine follow-up. Many parents are highly educated themselves and have high expectations for their children's academic achievement.

Ongoing communication with the school is another important way for parents to be involved. The classroom teacher is the primary point of contact for most parents, but principals, guidance counsellors, and settlement workers also play an important role.

Parents are often directly involved with their children's education through homework help. In addition, parents may engage in reading to their children, taking them on trips to the library, and supporting extra-curricular activities. Many of the English-speaking focus group participants volunteer in school. However, only a handful of parents in the non-English focus groups are involved in this way.

### ***How Involvement Differs by Grade Level***

Parents with children at different stages in the school system indicated their involvement changes according to the child's grade level. Typically, parents find it easier to be involved at the elementary level. Agendas were often mentioned and parents generally have more face-to-face contact with teachers. As children proceed into middle school, involvement decreases. Parents see a big difference in the availability of teachers from lower grades to middle and secondary. In addition, older students resist parental involvement in the school and parents generally indicated a respect for their growing independence.

### ***Differences Parents Who Have Immigrated Observe***

Immigrant parents in both the English and the non-English focus groups often made reference to differences between the Ontario education system and that of their homeland. Typically parents are not totally comfortable with the differences and some are frustrated by them. The most commonly observed difference mentioned by immigrant parents is less emphasis on textbooks. Many of these parents have relied in the past on textbooks to help their children with homework, and the active inquiry approach to learning now common in Ontario schools is unfamiliar. Some parents feel that academic standards are lower in Ontario than in their homeland. Also noted was the less formal social structure within Canadian schools, with different standards of behaviour as the accepted norm.

Many immigrant parents made positive comments about their experiences within the Ontario educational system. They said the teachers were friendly and knowledgeable, and their children enjoyed school. However, other immigrant families had negative experiences. These negatives included perceptions of teacher inflexibility, difficulty communicating with the school, inability to monitor progress, and discrimination.

### ***Barriers to Involvement***

Most commonly parents said work or other responsibilities hindered their involvement in their child's education. Newcomers in particular may be especially busy because they are often forced to operate in "survival" mode during the initial settlement period.

Parents experience two kinds of communication gaps: they may be frustrated by their child's unwillingness to talk about school, especially with older children, and they may also feel a lack of information and responsiveness from the school. Parents sometimes feel they do not have sufficient information on their child's program of study, especially so when the Ontario system is alien to their own experiences. In addition, parents suggest they don't always receive timely communication from classroom teachers regarding their child's progress or any problems that might arise.

Especially among newcomers, parents cite lack of confidence as a barrier to involvement. Parents may doubt their ability to communicate effectively with the school, or may have a general uneasiness toward the educational system. They also may not understand that their involvement is expected and so they need encouragement from schools. Not surprisingly, newcomer parents often find language to be a barrier.

Some parents said they feel quite lost as to how to help their child's academic progress without the use of textbooks. Parents who try to help with homework may discover they don't have enough knowledge of the work required.

### ***Parents' Feeling Welcome at School***

When asked whether they felt welcome in the school, parents said they did, with few exceptions. Parents are appreciative of the time given to them by school staff and their helpful attitude.

### ***How Schools Can Encourage Involvement***

Parents most often said that communication between home and school is crucial to parent involvement. This theme emerged as the most common of all themes in the study.

Communication with the classroom teacher is most important but friendly personal interaction with office staff and administration is also very important. Scheduled meetings, open houses, and information sessions were recommended quite often to increase parent involvement.

### ***Settlement Workers' Insights into Newcomer Needs***

The settlement workers who conducted focus groups joined in a debriefing session after they had conducted the non-English focus groups. They emphasized the following points, drawing upon insight both from moderating the focus groups and from their own experiences in their home countries.

1. Parents who attended the non-English focus groups were pleased to have their views heard. In addition, they appreciate sharing and learning, and they asked for more similar discussions. Although some do speak English, they feel more comfortable using their own language.

2. Even if parents may not seem to educators to be actively involved, they are very interested in their children's education. In most countries of origin, being involved in a child's education chiefly means ensuring homework is done and helping with it. Parents are often very invested in their child's achievement and in countries where final exams are heavily weighted, they may be "more nervous than their children about exams." Parents' presence in the school varies from place to place but in many societies is not expected.
3. Schooling in many countries of origin is more text-book based. Inquiry based learning is not familiar and thus parents often do not understand what the teacher is doing or what to do themselves to become involved with their children's education. In some countries, homework is quite lengthy from an early age and parents expect this.
4. Brief parent teacher interviews do not meet newcomer parents' need to learn about how Canadian education works and how they fit into it. Newcomers require more help to understand what involvement is possible.
5. Newcomer parents need a very strong welcome from the schools. All staff, from the office staff to the teacher to the principal, can affect how much parents feel their involvement is wanted. Welcoming committees made up of parents could help with extending friendly hands.

## **Summary of Principals' Focus Groups**

### ***Definition of Parent Involvement***

To begin the focus groups, the principals were asked to define parent involvement. This topic evoked considerable discussion in all three groups. It was apparent that these principals had put a great deal of thought into parent involvement. Ideas ranged considerably, with some focused on parents' presence in the school and others focused on less obvious kinds of involvement. As the discussion progressed, principals moved toward a consensus that, although parents' presence in the school is very desirable, the definition of parent involvement is much broader. Principals largely agreed that involvement can simply mean parents' interest and support of their children's school life. Ideally, principals want to see parents enter into a trusting, mutually respectful relationship with the school and understand what the school is trying to achieve. They see a parent's role to be an advocate for their child through positive communication with teachers.

While an involved parent may chiefly relate to his or her own child, principals hope that parents "care for their child's school, program and community and are willing to support and take part in ensuring its success." Principals recognize, however, that many parents are too busy to be actively involved in school support activities on an ongoing basis. Principals also recognize a difference in how parents can be involved as their children become adolescents needing more independence. However, even in secondary school, principals hope that parents support their children in "getting to school on time, having had breakfast, coming with a lunch, staying for their day, and not calling their child on the cell phone to say 'how are things going, by the way I'm picking up at 3:05 instead of 3:04.'"

### ***Trends***

Principals said many families are experiencing more poverty, poorer nutrition, and more social problems. They are seeing more children with special needs than in the past. In particular, the incidence of autism has grown. They also see parents being busier than ever before, with multiple jobs and relationships with home countries claiming parents' time and attention. Principals at all levels also see an increase in anxiety and mental health issues among children. Some children feel tremendous pressure to achieve high marks, even in the very early grades.

Secondary principals noted that more students are returning for a fifth year of high school, and opinions vary on whether this trend is a good thing. Not surprisingly principals noted the changing cultural mix of families in Peel Region. Another trend is more transience as newcomer families try to settle, when families break up, or when children move among foster homes. Noted also were trends in parents' behaviour: trying to be a friend rather than disciplinarian, a growing sense of entitlement, and an unwillingness to let children experience failure. On the positive side, better outreach by schools was noted.

### ***Barriers to Parent Involvement***

Lack of communication was mentioned most often in discussing barriers to parent involvement. Principals regret that students often do not deliver communication pieces to their parents or tell their parents what is happening at school. When communication does reach parents, they may not understand the special terminology used by educators. Principals realize that parents can feel intimidated by schools, and of course, they recognize that many parents find it hard to communicate because they do not speak English. Principals think some parents are just tired of hearing that their child is not achieving well. Principals also know that by the time children reach middle school, they typically discourage their parents from being involved.

Principals also see the trend of increasing transience as a major barrier to parent involvement. Additionally, the separation of elementary and middle schools can act as barrier to building relationships with parents because the time in middle school can be as little as two years. Principals also mentioned several other barriers: lack of meaningfulness in School Council involvement, overly demanding process for volunteering, lack of certainty on how to be involved, and transportation issues.

### ***Successful Strategies to Encourage Involvement***

When asked to describe successful involvement strategies they have used, principals related a broad variety of efforts. The strongest theme was the need to attract parents into the school. There was a general feeling that an enjoyable experience through school events and programs encourages other kinds of involvement. At such events, it helps if newcomers are specifically accommodated.

Having identified lack of communication as a barrier, principals stressed the need for multiple and creative methods to connect with parents. Some principals make a strong effort to develop personal relationships with parents and to learn about and celebrate families' cultures. In addition, principals feel that settlement workers provide a very important service that encourages a trusting relationship with the school. It was noted that parents who are already involved can help other parents connect with the school, and better communication with the grandparents, who

are often the main caregivers for children, may be fruitful.

The practice of cooperating with community organizations has helped in reaching parents. Collaborations have included providing space for Parks and Recreation programs, government funded tutoring, computer classes for parents, reading programs with the public library, and promotion of Scouting.

Some principals have made a special effort to ensure that all teachers understand the importance of parent involvement and employ strategies to increase it. At some schools, principals have made parent involvement a very specific focus, encouraging increased involvement over time. The idea of researching and meeting parents' needs was specifically addressed by some principals.

### **Summary of Teacher Focus Groups and Survey Comments**

Themes that emerged in the open-ended comments on the survey were similar to those the focus groups. Therefore, to correctly reflect the emphasis teachers placed on these themes, open-ended survey comments were coded along with the focus group transcripts. In addition, this summary includes references to parents and principals' views in order to show where there is agreement. Where warranted, reference is made to grade level. Although secondary teachers were well represented, there were proportionately fewer secondary than K-8 teachers in the focus groups and among the survey respondents. Therefore less emphasis on some themes by secondary teachers could be a result of less "air time."

#### ***Teachers' Definition of Parent Involvement***

Teachers view parent involvement in much the same way as principals do. Ideally, parents are involved in a positive relationship with the school, focussed on a common goal to support student success. Teachers recognised that parents' busy lives may restrict their involvement during the school day, but they valued parent support at home, especially the modelling of positive behaviours and attitudes. A number of comments revealed a sense of frustration that some parents are either not involved or are inappropriately involved. In the teachers' view, inappropriate involvement includes completing homework, making excuses for the child, not supporting the teacher when problems arise, and non-response to teacher communication. Teachers described how some parents see education as entirely the teachers' responsibility while some are over-involved.

#### ***Importance of Parent Involvement***

Across all focus groups and in the survey, teachers agreed that parent involvement in their children's education is very important, even though some may feel "bombarded by parents." Teachers in higher grades expressed disappointment at the extent of parent involvement and suggested that ideal parent involvement at the secondary level differs from earlier grades: parents need to adopt a supportive role and allow their children to become increasingly independent.

#### ***Trends***

The main trend teachers described is an over all decrease in parent involvement, largely because parents are too busy. Teachers recognised that newcomers are especially busy, often working

more than one job. At the secondary level, teachers noted that the desire for material goods has increased, leading students to work at jobs for very long hours and to own personal technology such as cell phones and iPods that can interfere with instructional time.

### ***Communication Strategies Teachers Employ***

In the focus groups, teachers were asked how they typically go about communicating with parents. This question was asked because both parents and principals identified communication between home and school as a crucial aspect of parent involvement. In addition, many teachers commented on communication strategies in the survey. The themes which emerged from the teacher data are listed below.

### ***Personal Conversations***

In the focus groups and survey, personal conversations emerged as the single most used strategy to encourage parent involvement in their children's education. Recall that principals also emphasized the importance of personal conversations as a communication strategy. In the early grades, many teachers have daily face-to-face contact with parents as they drop off and pick up their children, but some will make a point of calling as well. At the high school level, teachers are more likely to conduct personal conversations by phone. Reasons for calling home vary but generally teachers call home in response to concerns such as student absence or misbehaviour. On the other hand, some teachers stressed the need to contact parents for positive reasons, setting an encouraging tone for future communication.

### ***Newsletters and notes home***

Across all grade levels, teachers rely upon newsletters and regular notes home to communicate with parents. Newsletters may be sent out on a regular schedule, or may coincide with specific events such as at the end of an instructional unit. Typically in earlier grades, such written communication is more frequent. Many teachers have a practice of regularly sending notes home. Some teachers have developed strategies to secure parents' interest in reading newsletters. For example, they may have elementary and middle school students write the class newsletter themselves, providing both a learning opportunity and increased engagement of both parents and children. In other schools, classes rotate responsibility for writing the school-wide newsletter.

### ***Agendas***

Agendas are seen as a good tool for communication, particularly by teachers in the primary/junior divisions. At this level, teachers typically use agendas to give daily updates and positive feedback messages, and parents can respond in kind. Similar to "sunshine" phone calls, teachers send good news notes home via the agenda. Agenda use decreases by middle school but teachers may use it to engender self responsibility. The effectiveness of agendas in communication relates to how they are used; focus group participants emphasized that agendas are not used the same way by all teachers and may not be used at all.

### ***Websites***

Communication via website was mentioned by teachers at all grade levels, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some think websites are a great communication method; others do not favour their use as a means of communicating with parents because the onus is on parents to check the website. Teachers appreciate the multiple language information available at the Board

website. However, many find school websites to be outdated and teacher websites time-consuming to update. Survey respondents more often suggested use of websites as a personal than school strategy, although some website supporters recommended both.

### ***Email***

Despite concerns over protocol (discussed under Barriers below), some teachers prefer email as communication tool. In the focus groups, teachers in elementary and high schools mentioned email as a convenient, foremost method of transferring information to and from parents. At the same time, teachers are cautious to send only positive messages and to keep records of their messages. Through the open comments on the survey, teachers reiterated the value of using email to communicate. Email is a first choice alternative to making phone calls for some teachers because it is much more efficient. Some requested more convenient access to email.

### ***Multiple Languages***

Recognising language as a barrier, teachers at all grade levels value opportunities to communicate in multiple languages. Schools use various strategies, for example, dual language letters, interviews in other languages, students as translators for parents and signage in different languages. At the Peel District School Board website, teachers can access and print information for parents which has been translated into various languages.

### ***Multiple Methods***

Some teachers recommend using multiple methods of communication such as a combination of agendas/notes home, class website, phone calls, monthly newsletters.

### ***Settlement Worker Involved***

In the middle school focus groups, teachers spoke about the benefits of settlement workers' participation in parent communication. Not all schools have settlement workers, but where available they are very helpful in assisting immigrant families settle in to the school.

## **Barriers**

### ***Busy Life/Working***

Teachers confirmed parents' views on a key barrier, specifically that work or other responsibilities mean parents are too busy to be more involved in their children's education. This theme arose at all grade levels. Parents working shift work or multiple jobs are not available to come into school and are difficult to reach by phone. While teachers at all grade levels recognized and sympathised with parents' busy lives, they also commented that parents nevertheless have a responsibility to be involved in their children's education. Survey respondents also cited parents' busy lives as a barrier to parent involvement.

### ***Parents Don't Understand the Education System***

In the parent focus groups, recall that immigrants noted many ways in which the Ontario educational system was alien to their homeland experiences. Similarly, teachers across all grade levels felt that parents' lack of understanding of the current approach to education is a barrier to involvement. However, this lack of understanding is not exclusive to immigrant parents.

Changes in the Ontario curriculum, report card system, and teaching methods mean that parents from all backgrounds struggle to understand what their children are doing in school.

### ***Communication Barriers***

Across all school levels, teachers identified various communication barriers which impede parent involvement. Many see the special terminology they use as a problem. Language used in curriculum documents, report cards and newsletters came under fire. Educator jargon was mentioned as a barrier to communication by many survey respondents.

As mentioned by principals, teachers echoed the sentiment that students often do not deliver communication pieces to their parents. Parents who wanted timely communication expressed frustration at their inability to connect with classroom teachers. At all focus groups, teachers expressed concerns over protocol regarding email. Despite cautions about using email to contact parents, some teachers feel strongly that email is a useful communication tool as it is hard to reach parents by phone. According to survey respondents, teachers are sometimes limited in their ability to contact parents due to a lack of phone access, private space, or current contact numbers for parents.

### ***Language Barriers***

Teachers agreed with parents and principals that language is a barrier to those parents whose first language is not English. Language barriers impede all types of communication, newsletters and interviews in particular. Telephone conversations and parent-teacher interviews are also hindered by language barriers. For parents with limited English, just trying to communicate can be a risk.

### **Barriers to Volunteering**

In the elementary focus groups, teachers described the criminal record check as a barrier to volunteering in school. The process is time-consuming, may require a fee, and can be particularly intimidating for immigrant parents. Once completed, the paperwork may take weeks to reach the school. Although teachers recognised the need the check the records for volunteers, they wished for the process to be streamlined.

### ***Lack of Confidence/Intimidated***

Recall that parents cited lack of confidence as a barrier to involvement. Similarly, teachers at all grade levels described school as ‘intimidating’ to parents. Parents who speak English as a second language have an additional reason to lack confidence in communicating with teachers, and their children may discourage communication out of fear of embarrassment. At the secondary level, parents face a further obstacle because their children have multiple teachers who change with each semester, thus increasing the sense of intimidation. Teachers used the open comments on the survey to reiterate this theme.

### ***Teachers Don’t Have Enough Time***

Some teachers at elementary and middle school level felt they could do more to encourage parent involvement if they had more time to organize daily communication. Time spent on report cards was a source of complaint.

### ***Student Absences and Transience***

Maintaining consistent school/home relationships is a particular challenge in areas where students are withdrawn from school for extended periods, according to teachers in elementary and middle schools. Students may be absent for weeks or months at a time while they vacation abroad. Likewise, students who are sent abroad to live with relatives until they reach school age arrive in Canada unprepared for their grade level.

### ***Older Students' Growing Independence***

Agreeing with parents and principals, middle and high school teachers confirmed that by the time children reach middle school they typically prefer their parents not be visibly involved.

### ***Teachers as Parents***

Being a teacher makes it quite difficult for some to be involved as a parent, as mentioned by elementary and middle school teachers. For example, teacher-parents are not available to go into school during the day to participate in trips or attend assemblies.

### ***Lack of Diversity Among Teachers***

According to high school teachers, parents might be more involved if staff were more representative of the diverse community within Peel Region.

## **Strategies Teachers Recommend**

When asked what strategies they recommend to encourage involvement, teachers in the focus groups described a variety of approaches.

### ***Engage in Personal Conversations***

Echoing their answers to the question about typical use, teachers from all divisions recommended personal conversations the most. On the survey, it was named as best personal strategy much more often than any other. This strong endorsement coincides with the principals' and parents' emphasis on this type of communication.

### ***Host Special Events and Programs***

Teachers in the focus groups agreed with principals that hosting special events or programs are a good way to attract parents into school. Teacher survey respondents indicated that special events and programs are the single best school-level strategy. It is particularly popular at the elementary and middle school levels. Literacy hour, fitness nights, school orientation and welcome days are examples of successful events. Teachers have to be creative in encouraging families into the school for special events. For example, grandparents can take part in events by reading with students from dual language books. Community networking is another way to encourage families to attend.

### ***Provide a Welcoming Environment***

A welcoming environment is a key element in encouraging parent involvement, according to elementary and middle school teachers in the focus groups. Survey respondents recommended this strategy highly at both a personal and school level. Right from first contact, teachers aim to set a positive tone. A simple strategy such as offering culturally familiar foods at special events

can help welcome parents into the school. Some see that secondary schools could do more to welcome parents. Administrators play a crucial role in promoting a positive school culture where parent involvement is valued.

### ***Invite Parents into Class***

At the elementary and middle school level, teachers often said they invite parents into the classroom. This tactic was also identified on the survey by some teachers as their best personal strategy. Expertise can be shared within the classroom. Teachers model behaviour for parents; parents can share their working skills with students.

### ***Understand Parents' Needs***

As mentioned by principals, teachers said that making an effort to understand parents' needs is important in facilitating involvement. Meeting parents' needs was cited by a few teacher survey respondents as a best personal and best school strategy.

### ***Educate Parents on Their Role***

In the focus groups, teachers described how taking the time to educate parents on their role, be they new kindergarten parents or new immigrant parents, can set the stage for future involvement. Teachers appreciate that settlement workers now educate parents during intakes. Although this theme did not emerge as a best personal or school strategy, survey respondents did mention this theme through their final comments.

## **Summary of Teacher Survey Findings**

Note that percentages and graphs are presented in the section *Details of Teacher Survey* on pg. 91.

### **Characteristics of Survey Respondents**

The various grade levels were well represented. In addition, respondents represented the full range of teaching experience, with a strong showing of those with 10 years' experience or less. Although the survey was intended chiefly for classroom teachers, a few administrators and other school staff responded. For the sake of simplicity, all respondents are included under the term "teachers" for the purposes of this report.

### **Teachers' Preferred Types of Parent Involvement**

The majority of teachers rated all types of parent involvement as important (somewhat important or very important). Indeed, they chose the highest rating of "very important" most of the time. This strong endorsement of parent involvement matches the high valuing by focus group participants across this study, both parents and educators. Daily follow-up of school activities came at the top of the teachers' list, revealing values similar to those of parents, who said they engage in this type of involvement most of all. The next three types also received a very high rating: support and guidance in response to specific circumstances, attendance at parent/teacher interviews, and reading with children on a regular basis. These ratings correspond well to parents' thinking, except that parents are not enthusiastic about parent/teacher interviews.

Teachers also highly value regular communication with parents, parental support in course and career choices, attending school events, and supporting children's activities outside of school. Least valued by teachers were School Council meetings and volunteering.

## **Barriers**

The next question asked teachers to rate the significance of barriers that parents, principals and teachers had mentioned in the focus groups. The barriers were divided into three categories: general, communication, and volunteering.

### **General Barriers**

Under general barriers, educators thought the most significant barrier was parents' busy work life and other responsibilities. Here we see agreement with parents, who talked most about this type of barrier in the focus groups. Not far behind, the next five barriers received almost equal ratings from teachers. Four of these are along similar "knowledge" themes, that is, parents may have trouble understanding the teaching methods or day-to-day program of study, don't know how become involved, or lack knowledge to help with homework. These themes largely match what the parents told us in the focus groups about their knowledge gaps. Still within this set of almost equally rated barriers, family transience was seen as a problem by teachers, as it was by principals. Teachers rated the item "parents feel intimidated by the school" next and children's discouragement of parental involvement almost the same. Teachers rated transportation problems as the least important, but still substantial, general barrier.

### **Communication Barriers**

Teachers rated all communication barriers as fairly significant. First was the issue of language barriers, echoing the parent and principals' focus group results. Next was the problem that communication sent with children often doesn't reach home. Recall that principals said this was a considerable barrier. Teachers see that parents also have a hard time with educational jargon. The next two communication barriers both relate to the mechanics of communicating: difficulty reaching each other and teacher concerns about protocol particularly in use of email. A general insufficiency of communication came next, followed by parents' lack of confidence.

### **Barriers to Volunteering**

Teachers rated all types of barriers to volunteering as fairly significant. Demanding processes to become volunteers, including police check, received the highest rating. Parents' lack of awareness of opportunities came next, followed by unclear recruitment process and then an actual lack of opportunities. These results fit well with views expressed in the focus groups

## **Support**

Teachers were asked first about the support they had received in encouraging parent involvement and then about the types of support they would like to have. They could select more than one in each category.

## Support Received

The majority of teachers said they had received some kind of support. The most common type was a school wide strategy. A fair proportion had received written information on parent involvement. Formal teacher training and professional development workshops came in lower. A small proportion described other types such as administrator encouragement to communicate with parents and use of translators.

## Support Desired

The most preferred type of support was a school-wide strategy; this result indicates that teachers appreciate the school-wide efforts described by principals in the focus groups. The next most popular type was written information. A fair proportion would like professional development workshops and some would like formal teacher training. Interestingly, some said they would they did not want any support.

## Best Personal Strategy

Teachers responded with open ended comments to the question, “What do you consider to be the single most successful strategy that you employ personally in encouraging parent involvement?” The ourstanding result is that personal conversations was by far the most favoured strategy to encourage parent involvement. Agendas and, newsletters and notes home were th next most popular strategies but came in well behind personal conversations.

## Best School Strategy

At the school level, teachers named events and programs most often as the best strategy, followed by newsletters and notes home.

## Details of Parent Focus Groups

### How Do Parents Feel About Involvement?

In all focus groups participants stressed the importance of parental involvement in children’s education. Parents typically expressed eagerness and a sense of responsibility to support their children’s learning.

*I want to make it clear that for everything regarding children, parents involvement is must. This is our responsibility.*

*I think if you try to keep your kids encouraged, you have a better chance of them actually wanting to stay in school. The big fear is once they get to high school they're not going to continue, they're going to drop out. It's not 100% guaranteed but it is better than” Oh well, my parents don't care what I do in school, so what difference does it make if I stay here.”*

Some parents described their involvement as a partnership with their child’s school.

*It's like a partnership. You're supporting them, they are supporting you.*

*Parents and teachers are the primary supporters in their child's education.*

Many parents, especially those in the non-English groups, expressed gratitude to the School Board for the opportunity to participate in the focus group itself and hoped further similar opportunities for involvement would arise.

*If you have more focus groups like this, it will help parents to become more involved.*

*More group sessions should be conducted and we hope this will help board to understand what is needed. Multilingual group sessions, monthly meetings and newcomer parents should come out and meet, conduct sessions with settlement workers.*

*A person feels more comfortable expressing himself in his own language. Schools should organize multilingual kind of meetings.*

Some want to be recognized for their efforts to help their children.

*We appreciate that the Peel District School Board is hosting this focus group in order to prove to everyone that we are caring for our children.*

### **In What Ways Are Parents Involved in Their Child's Education?**

Parents indicated a variety of ways in which they feel actively involved. Many of these ways were seen as a natural element of parent-child relationships: daily communication about school, monitoring or helping with homework, and offering support and encouragement. Ongoing communication with the school was another important way for parents to be involved. Beyond these supports related directly to school work, parents may engage in reading to their children, taking them on trips to the library, and supporting extra-curricular activities. The following list summarizes the key ways parents are involved.

- Daily follow-up and active interest
- Support and encouragement
- Regular communication with school
- Volunteering
- Helping with homework
- Reading and using the library
- Activities outside of school

#### ***Daily Follow Up and Active Interest***

By far the most common type of involvement consists of daily follow up on school activities. Typically parents in the focus groups said they do this even if they have no other involvement. On a regular basis, parents ask children about their day at school, read over agendas, try to ensure homework is done, and generally monitor their children's progress. Daily follow-up is often built into a routine, and communication about school may form part of regular meal-time

conversation. Many parents are highly educated themselves and have high expectations for their children's academic achievement.

*I am a holder of PhD degree in Analysis. I am at the assessment process of my credentials. I follow up with my children every day through thorough follow-up and observation. I have a discussion with them at lunch time about how was their day in school.*

*We sit together and ask kids about their day, what they did in school. We get input from kids, ask if they need help. My wife can contribute a lot, being a teacher back home. I help them: pickup and drop off, whatever children need.*

*We have to keep a constant track on their study, on their behaviour, on their progress every day. We have to make a schedule, and spend a few hours. It doesn't matter how busy we are, but that is the priority, that we look after our children.*

### ***Support and Encouragement***

While daily follow up is incorporated into family routine, parents often offer support and encouragement to their children in response to specific circumstances. For issues such as choosing careers and dealing with social concerns, parents consider the support they offer to be an essential component in involvement beyond routine follow-up.

*When it comes to choosing a career, I engage them a lot periodically in a discussion. What abilities do you have, what are your feelings? So I am involved in that especially when they are getting from Grade 11 to 12, letting them know the various options available that they can choose.*

*If he is not doing well in school, or having problems with his friends, understanding kids' philosophy and being friendly to them so that they can share everything with you, that is what I believe is very important.*

Some parents mentioned specific ways they provide encouragement such as offering special treats, sharing in activities, and acknowledging their child's opinions.

*We ask kids to learn in play way. We encourage them by giving rewards, like we will go for an outing if they study well.*

*I want to say that as a part of involvement first of all we should involve ourselves in the activities of our children. Like when teachers ask small kids to bring cards as on Valentine day, we as parents should prepare cards for them and this way they feel good.*

*My child is in Grade 8 and I think it is important to encourage her more and acknowledge what she has done. She thinks the math, and the science class in Canada are a bit too easy for her and it is a waste of her time. Therefore, knowing what she thinks about the education program is how I get involved in my child's education.*

### ***Regular Communication with the School***

Many parents are involved through ongoing communication with the school. Communication takes several forms such as written notes in the agenda, email exchanges with classroom teachers, and meetings with various staff members including teachers, guidance counsellors and settlement workers. The classroom teacher is the primary point of contact for most parents. How communication changes as children progress through school is detailed in the section How Does Involvement Differ by Grade.

*I always keep in touch with the teacher and I think that is the only secret of my children's success.*

*I am in contact with the class teacher through the student's agenda. I have noticed that the class teacher responds to my inquiries through all possible means, like the agenda. Some teachers have websites, so you can email the teacher and keep abreast of what's going on through those.*

*I meet with the guidance counsellor after every 15 days regularly and just check with him how my children are doing at school. Similarly I meet with the teachers and discuss with them if there is any problem.*

*Once a month I come and meet the settlement worker at school. I bring my student's report cards to him and ask him to explain my children's progress. I also ask him about course selection.*

### ***Volunteering***

Many of the English-speaking focus group participants volunteer in school. Parents volunteer in the classroom, on field trips, at special events and on school council. However, only a handful of parents in the non-English focus groups are involved in this way. Note that in the section entitled Barriers, the language barrier was of greater concern for these parents and this barrier may have prevented those parents volunteering in school.

*I have also been volunteering at the school during the past eight to nine months, helping them in studies, helping weak students, preferably in mathematics being my field. I am helping them on trips also.*

*I volunteer at my son's elementary school. For my girls, I always volunteered on the school trips. I think that helps you be a bit more confident going in to the school.*

*I was always on Parent Council, K-5, so I was at the school a lot, going on trips with them helping out, even other students. I was there helping in the library, at the shows, helping kids do talent shows.*

*I volunteered at the graduation concert for my daughter and she was very happy. I also participated in many trips that my daughter went.*

### ***Helping with Homework***

Parents in both English and non-English focus groups are directly involved with their children's education through homework help. Parents acknowledge varying degrees of involvement in homework, from ensuring it has been completed to "practically doing" the assignments. Some parents indicated a direct relationship between the degree of assistance provided at home and their child's grades at school.

*When my child comes home I help her with her homework. I clear her doubts with math. I get story books and explain the story in Tamil and English.*

*We are involved by monitoring the homework, not just "is it done?" but ask to see it, review, check to see if there are problems, suggest stuff.*

*I really need to help them with the homework; I find myself an integral part of their homework, accomplishing their homework, getting it done. If I don't help them, then their marks really do suffer.*

*Every day I say do you have any projects? No, no, no. Then you find out on the Sunday night that it's due on Monday. Can you help me with this? And my husband and I are practically doing these assignments. Every parent does, no matter what they say.*

Not surprisingly, parents often linked their ability to offer assistance with their own educational background, although they may not be employed in their chosen vocation.

*I am a holder of Master's degree in physiotherapy. It is taking me some time to assess my credentials. Later, I will decide whether to continue my high studies or look for a job. As for my children, I do follow up with them on a daily basis once they come back from school and help them with any assignment that may have.*

*I am a graduate of English literature. And I can help my children at home in studying English, science and math.*

*My role is to help my children as much as I can. As I have experience in chemistry, I can help them with it; as for math and science, the situation is different.*

*Whenever he feels like he needs help he comes and asks me. I see what has been taught in the school and then I apply my teaching skills to help children, because I was teacher back home.*

Considerable discussion revolved around the topic of homework, particularly around how much homework was appropriate. More comments on homework are reported in the final section of this report.

### ***Reading Books and Visiting the Library***

Another way in which parents indicated they are involved is through reading to their children and making trips to the local library. Some parents buy books, but many more indicated they use

the library as a resource for reading books and homework help. A trip to the library is part of family routine for some families. Only a few parents mentioned reading books provided by the school.

*My children love to go to library and I take them every week that helps them a lot to see and read new books.*

*My son is research minded, he always likes to investigate even though he is in kindergarten I have discovered his extraordinary skills in research. I take him to the library on Saturdays or Mondays and help him to find science books. He reads with me.*

*On Wednesday he brings a reading book. I read with him.*

### **Activities Outside of School**

Many parents support their children's learning through activities which take place after school. After-school activities include sports, dance lessons, or family outings with an educational theme, such as a visit to the ROM. Parents broaden their children's educational experiences through outside school activities and some immigrant families seek to maintain their cultural heritage via these activities.

*I try and stress talking about what they are currently involved in, what subjects, and build on what's interesting to them. ...sometimes you can turn that around and create a little interest in some way whether it's going either to the ROM and learn a little bit separately outside the school. Link it and make it interesting. I found that successful in a few different areas.*

*We started a program at home to have a presentation from every one of them about a topic that he loves. It could be about anything they are interested in. They make a scientific presentation.*

*One of my children struggles quite a bit academically. So we've found it's important to encourage her to be involved in after-school activities that she's interested in other than academics. She's involved in church and sports, different things that she enjoys.*

*As a parent, I focus more on my child's social activities and hobbies such as swimming, going to extra French and English lessons.*

*We have to help them in learning our culture by taking them to dance and music classes.*

### **Involvement Left to Partner**

A few parents said they leave the primary responsibility for their children's education to their partner.

*To be honest, I am not involved in my daughters' study at home, and I get feedback from their mom who is the one responsible for following up with them.*

*I leave responsibility of follow up at home to my wife for helping my children.*

### **How Does Involvement Differ by Grade Level?**

Parents with children at different stages in the school system indicated their involvement changes according to the child's grade level. These differences were generally reflected throughout the focus group discussions and are addressed directly here. Typically, parents find it easier to be involved at the elementary level. Agendas are an important form of communication and parents generally have some face-to-face contact with teachers. As children proceed into middle school, parents' sense of connection decreases. Parents see a big difference in the availability of teachers from lower grades to middle and secondary. In addition, older students resist parental involvement in the school and parents generally indicated a respect for their growing independence.

*Younger kids tend to tell you everything, they can't wait to tell you what the teacher said, what the homework is, everything. The older ones, they just come home.*

*I didn't feel as comfortable [in middle school] as at the elementary school. The times when I needed extra support for my son, it took a fair bit of effort on my part to get to know the teacher.*

*When my children were elementary, I always took them to school, and my husband always picked them up. So we always saw the teacher, we had like a one-on-one with the teacher daily. You are more involved because you are seeing the teacher every day. In high school they come by themselves.*

*The elementary schools I find it is an open door policy but as they get older you're pushed out, you're not encouraged to become involved or the teacher doesn't have time to make the parent involved.*

*With elementary school, because we were volunteering much more regularly, there was that sort of family feeling with communication. I don't know if you can keep that going with middle school.*

*Huge difference [in high school] they are very independent. They don't want you standing even on the school grounds some days.... They will come to you with the odd problem; they pretty much are taking care of it. Not too far from now they'll be in college, and they should be independent so if you think of it, you don't want to hold on too tight.*

High school students have the added responsibility of course selection, and this decision process can be a challenge for those parents who are not familiar with the requirements and opportunities of the Ontario school system.

*In lower grades there are no problems because as parents we are very much in touch with our children but in higher classes we are not very much sure of the course selection procedures or how these things works.*

### **What Differences do Immigrant Parents Observe?**

Participants who have immigrated to Canada, especially those in the non-English focus groups, often made reference to differences between the Ontario education system and that of their homeland.

*Because we are in a different culture and education system, it takes time to understand it.*

*I've noticed that Canadian education focuses more on the child's hands-on skills. Compared to Chinese education methods, it is completely different.*

Typically parents are not totally comfortable with the less formal inquiry based approach that is the standard in Ontario schools.

*I share with my wife the fact that there is a huge difference between traditional (formal) way of teaching back home and the modern way of teaching in Canada. The good thing here is that the student has freedom to search and analyze information. I can see both many positive and negative things.*

*As for my Grade 5 student, she became more careless, and she is wasting her time on some trivial things. You can consider that we may come from the formal school of education and we want to teach our children the same method we were taught. But the best impression in my opinion is to mix both ways together; especially – as our colleagues here have just mentioned – there is no reference book that shows what is needed for my child to do at home, as we want to know what our children are studying in school.*

*I have noticed the difference between curriculum in India and here. In India they mention straightaway what is to be done during the year, but here in the curriculum they simply say by the end of grade the child should be able to do this and that, only expectations and this is not a proper way.*

Specific newer practices can be confusing, such as increased writing in math or encouragement of leisure reading to enhance writing skills. Use of computers may be unfamiliar.

*In our country's education system, we didn't write much in math. Only a few questions are wordy, others are pure calculations. Here the parents don't understand the concept; also parents use different methods to help.*

*In my country, parents don't encourage reading. They think it will disturb the studies. I used to hide and read. Here the important reason to encourage reading is because children have to write a lot.*

*Children don't do more [hand]writing work in these days as they were doing back home. They are doing almost entire work on computers here. That's why their writing skills are not that good as they use to have back home.*

However, some parents are quite happy with differences they observe.

*We feel that the school is aiming for growing the student's skills for learning in many aspects. I can see that my son is thinking more and uses his skills for correct conclusion. Back home, it never came to my mind that my Grade 3 son would have projects. Here, he has done two projects so far. I am happy with what he does at school. Back home (Syria) is known for its strong curriculum, but here is the way of teaching is completely different.*

*Back home many students tend to memorize materials; but here is different. Teachers here use strategies that students like. For example, my daughter did not like the school back home. Here, she likes her school so much.*

### ***Textbooks***

Linked to the differences in teaching approach, the lower emphasis on textbooks in the Ontario system creates a problem. Many of these parents have relied in the past on textbooks to help their children with homework.

*Back home, there are textbooks for math, science, and other materials; but here there is no such thing. There are times when having a textbook is necessary for the parents at home.*

*I think we do not have books to impart education. Back home we had books. We go to the web but it has so much detail we can't understand. In the absence of books we do not know what to do. If we have books we can help kids to do some extra but without books we are helpless.*

*We know that we have two systems of education: the back home one and the Canadian one represented by the Peel District School Board. We do accept the Canadian one while following up from home. Still, one thing is missing: our education back home depends on reference books. Here we do not have such a thing.*

### ***Social Structure and Expectations***

Some immigrants comment upon the less formal social structure within Canadian schools, with different standards of behaviour as the accepted norm. They are uncomfortable with the freedoms extended to Canadian students, such as the liberty to leave school premises, the open display of dating relationships, and relaxed student-teacher relationships.

*The new thing I came to know here in Canada is that secondary students can go out of school during breaks; which is not permitted for secondary students back home. I wish the school administration would not let them get out during recess.*

*In school premises the children behaviour is very open male-female and sometimes it's embarrassing for us to see that. They should come and stay here as students and should not behave that way.*

*Even though in Sri Lanka they have implemented new education system, still caning is used. I was also a teacher but here in Canada they encourage the teacher more. I never had so much patience as a teacher in Sri Lanka to deal with the students.*

*We are shy to integrate and talk to other communities. But here students are calling the teachers by name and say hello when they pass by. In our country, we stand up to greet our teacher and keep on standing until they tell us to sit.*

Parents expressed some concerns about tolerance of what they consider to be inappropriate behaviour at school.

*Even in school, some children smoke. My son comes and tells me that these children that smoke are disturbing him.*

*Some sort of discipline training should be given to teachers. We control them at home. Teachers should watch them and what they are doing. We do not want them to have girlfriends or boyfriends at age 14 years. Kids ask us to be cool but I am always worried. Only God can help them.*

In some cases, parents coming from countries where harsher discipline is accepted fear Canadian laws against corporal punishment and resent that children are encouraged to call 911.

*Laws have prevented us from disciplining children. We are afraid children would call 911.*

*Here there are 1000 rules restricting us to discipline our kids.*

*When we were new some parents told us that you can't be strict with your children here otherwise you will face some serious consequences from the authorities. So we were very much frightened and we did not ask much our children how they are doing at school. But now I think it's all because of our lack of knowledge about the education system.*

*The strongest thing I want to tell is that children are taught to use 911. It's not good. I strongly recommend it should be avoided. Every parent wants to do best for their kids. What I can do for my child no one can do.*

*Parents feel scared. My children told me, mom do not say anything police will arrest you if we call 911. Before kids used to be scared of parents now parents are scared of kids.*

### **Academic Standards**

Looking at differences in educational systems, some parents feel that academic standards are lower in Ontario than in their homeland. Some complained that teachers overuse positive

reinforcement, which they considered only to be appreciative words, not concrete teaching strategies.

*Level of math is very simple. It should be enhanced. My son is in Grade 2 doing problem sums in India. Here it's simple addition, not even carrying.*

*Like as you know about our children in India, they learn all the tables at Grade 1 and are very well developed (mentally). On the other hand here even at Grade 5 children/students are not able to even count or identify money denomination.*

*Parents' expectations of children become so high when they start comparing to the back home education system, and with kids of their relatives. ...Teachers simply encourage by saying very good, well done, excellent job, I really appreciate, I like the way you write, keep going, etc. but nothing concrete imparted to them.*

Some immigrants find their children to have much less homework in Ontario than in their home countries. While some parents perceive this to be a positive aspect, others are disturbed enough to consider returning to their homeland where they feel educational standards are higher.

*We came from the background that students at home must be studying all day long. It is a huge transition. The problem I have is that I used to study all days and nights, and I want my children to follow me. We can give them activities and recess for them and pave the way for school. However, we know that it is good for the school to take the lead.*

*My elder son is in Grade 6 at Morning Star, whenever I ask him to do homework he used to say "I haven't got any homework". I met his teacher and she told me he is doing O.K., he is intelligent, but we as a parent are not satisfied. Because of these reasons my husband even planned to go back to India. According to him, study of children is better in India.*

### **Positives**

Many immigrant parents made positive comments about their experiences within the Ontario educational system. They said the teachers were friendly and knowledgeable, and their children enjoyed school.

*Here teachers stay friendly and encourage children to study.*

*The teachers here are doing well. They have skills to better explain certain topics to our children. I came to realize that here is much better than back home.*

*My son and daughter are happy with the school. They have little homework. They like studying in Canada.*

*I can say that teachers here are good. In home countries it is really hard to meet the principal, but here if parents have any problem you can talk to the principals any time and they would not even tell the teachers. They will keep it confidential.*

### ***Negatives***

Beyond the difficulties noted above, some immigrant families had negative experiences. These negatives included perceptions of teacher inflexibility, difficulty communicating with the school, inability to monitor children's progress themselves, and discrimination.

*I feel that teacher here have a set pattern to impart education. They do only as per defined structure and are not that much flexible innately as required to understand diverse parents.*

*We have difficulty communicating with the school. They were studying at private international schools back home. Their levels were excellent. My Grade 12 son was sent to Grade 11. He did not do well in school.*

*Here in schools they don't take monthly tests. That is why we can't monitor our children's progress on a regular basis.*

*There are status differences between students and between different cultures. There is discrimination among students and Sri Lankan children get affected. They mentally get affected by seeing the behaviour of other children belonging to other cultures.*

### **What Are Barriers to Involvement?**

When participants in the focus groups were asked specifically about various barriers to involvement, they echoed many of the themes already covered. In spite of repetition of some themes, barriers are presented here to show where parents place emphasis.

- Busy life/Working
- Communication gaps/confusion about how to be involved
- Language barriers
- Lack of textbooks and curriculum information
- Involvement discouraged by older children
- Lack of subject knowledge
- Lack of confidence
- Transportation barriers
- Conflict with sibling needs
- Barriers to volunteering
- Selective involvement
- Other barriers

### ***Busy Life/Working***

Most commonly parents said work or other responsibilities meant they were too busy to be more involved in their child's education. Working parents lament the fact they are not available during the school day.

*My husband wants to spend time with kids but he works 12 hours. I tried to work to share his load but when I got there they said they do not have a job. So my husband needs to work 12 hour shifts to pay bills and mortgage.*

*The time is a problem for me. For example, when I tried to communicate with the teacher at school, but after coming back from work, it is almost six o'clock. How can I make an appointment with a teacher after that?*

*My husband works during the days. He would welcome if there was after hours competitions or chess tournaments, clubs, that's not during the workday. He finds middle of the day hard to get to.*

*For me [a barrier is] time. I'm gone 11 hours of more per day. I rush to get to School Council meetings. I donate to the school fundraising, collected recyclables for the kindergarten class. But during the school day, I can't do it.*

*I think just life [gets in the way]. You have a full-time job, you get home you're tired. Sometime you let it slip, you're tired, you had a bad day. Sometimes you just want to lock yourself in your room you don't want to see anybody. That gets in the way. Not every day, but sometimes.*

Immigrant parents face a distinct dilemma. They immigrate to Canada for an improved lifestyle, but are often forced to operate in “survival” mode during the initial settlement period.

*As in starting being new immigrants initially we faced many problems. Finding work and survival was difficult. Because of work issues we could not give time to the kids. As our jobs started getting stable we started spending more time with kids.*

*As a new immigrant, it is so hard to be involved in my child's education in Canada because we are so busy to do some survival jobs to support our family.*

*Because I immigrated to Canada not long ago, I am busy trying to settle my family and solve issues such as buying a house, learning to drive and etc... Therefore, I do not have time to be involved in my child's education.*

### ***Communication Gaps/Confusion about How to be Involved***

Parents stressed that lack of communication is often a barrier: they may be frustrated by their child's unwillingness to talk about school, especially with older children, and they may also feel a lack of information and responsiveness from the school. Many parents feel they do not have sufficient information on their child's program of study, especially so when the Ontario system is alien to their own experiences.

*I often receive a number of agendas from my child's school, I always sign them carefully. But I feel that the teacher never looks into these and does not give feedback.*

*My biggest beef is I don't know what's going on in the school. I have to drag it out, I don't know what they're working on, I don't know anything. I don't have any communication from the school.*

*The communication is lacking, to be honest. My son is 16, they won't tell me anything. I have to work at finding out the information because he's 16.*

*In Canada we don't get all information from school. It is hard to know what is going on in school. Lack of communication is a problem.*

*This is the biggest issue for all the parents to know that how they can be involved in their children's education because we don't know what to do, what are they reading or on which assignment they are working.*

Parents want to engage in timely communication with classroom teachers. When children encounter a problem in school, some parents said they may wait days to hear from the classroom teacher. Calling to make an appointment adds to the time delay.

*Sometimes you have a long sobbing story about what happened [from the child], so you're all frustrated and saddened by it and you want to talk to the teacher right away. Then it's two to three days before you talk to the teacher, you lose momentum as the days go by. When you finally talk to the teacher to get one story, get the other story, and then you get the truth.*

*I've called to try and find out about something, and the teachers have tried, and the principals have tried, but they are really busy. They've got to do bus duty or some other aside from just straight teaching, they've got these other responsibilities. I felt like I was chasing them around day after day.*

*I think one thing is maybe the culture is not that friendly. Everything you have to make an appointment. You can't just talk to the teacher.*

This parent did not know what to do about the automatic notifications of children's absence from class.

*My son in Grade 11 must have skipped French 25 times. He doesn't care. I'm flabbergasted that no-one's called me. [I get the message] Every day and it annoys me. I don't know [what to do with it.]*

### **Language Barriers**

Parents whose first language is not English commonly identified language as a major barrier. Parents struggle to read to their children in English and decline the opportunity to participate in field trips.

*Since there is a language barrier in English in Canada, I cannot effectively help my child academically.*

*When I tried to read an English book so that I can read it to my child, there were so many new vocabularies that I could not understand. I felt it was so hard to complete a book.*

*There was once a permission form coming from my child's school trip, asking for parent volunteers for help. My daughter really wanted me to go. However, I refused the offer since I felt that I could not communicate well with the students because of the language barrier. After my child came back from the trip, she was upset because I didn't go. I felt guilty and bad that I didn't go.*

Some parents mentioned that the availability of interpreters was helpful in communicating with the school, but suggested that many newcomers are not aware of this service.

*Parents should be informed that school has interpreter with them and they will feel comfortable when they are contacting or participating in school activities.*

Conversely, this parent disagreed that language was a barrier due to the proficiency requirements in the immigration process.

*Mostly who are coming here on the point system are educated and so the language barrier may not be an issue for many parents.*

### ***Lack of Textbooks and Curriculum Information***

As noted earlier, some parents, particularly those in the non-English focus groups, said they feel quite lost as to how to help their child's academic progress without the use of text books. Parents also want more information on the academic program of study in the form of course calendars or syllabi. Some parents are concerned that, without support materials, they will confuse their children by using methods different from those taught by the classroom teacher.

*No text books are used in classes. In my country India, school gives textbooks to children. We can read the book and explain to children; here if we try to help my daughter she says I am confusing her.*

*I have to agree that it's a great idea having some kind of syllabus or some sort of schedule maybe monthly sent home or in their agendas.*

Although this parent received a copy of the curriculum, it was not helpful because the teacher was unable to explain the document in a meaningful way.

*When we came from India and asked teacher to give us a copy of the syllabus, we found even the teacher was not able to understand the meaning of the syllabus.*

### ***Involvement Discouraged by Older Children***

Particularly as children progress to high school, parents encounter more resistance to their presence at school. High school students express reluctance to have their parents involved and sometimes even school staff may discourage parental presence for this reason.

*As they are getting older, they don't want us to be in school at all. My son said, "Stay away".*

*Most kids after 16 don't even want to see their parents at school. For parent teacher interviews they say you don't have to come.*

*When I asked about volunteering, and it was said to me in front of my son, [the school secretary] said we really do need a lot of supports, but the kids don't like it, he won't fit in and he will be teased.*

### ***Lack of Subject Knowledge***

Parents who try to help with homework may discover they don't have enough knowledge of the work required. This theme was often linked to the lack of support materials.

*I try but I can't understand home work, so we can't help. We just push kids to study at home. If we do not know, what we can do?*

*For example, my child had a home work to write an article about Shakespeare, due to lack of knowledge of this famous person, I cannot help my child.*

*My kids are doing long division, and I show them and they say no, that's wrong. So you can't really support them because you are doing it wrong.*

### ***Lack of Confidence***

Especially among new immigrants, parents cite lack of confidence as a barrier to involvement. Parents may doubt their ability to communicate effectively with the school, or may have a general uneasiness toward the educational system. They also may not understand that their involvement is expected and so they need encouragement from schools.

*Shyness is one of the factors. Parents feel nervous while talking with the teacher so they can't express their issues fully and they avoid going to school.*

*We lack in confidence to initiate a discussion.*

*We (parents) need encouragement from school administration to get involved in our children's education. Both parents are working hard to understand how to cooperate with the school.*

*I think for some parents it could be their background, where they are coming from, they are not used to it. They don't expect to be involved because everything is left to the teachers [in their home countries. They are not aware of the benefit to their children. Sometimes they don't have confidence, they don't know if they can communicate well enough with the teachers. I think it's cultural, people come from different backgrounds. I think the teachers need to make the parents aware that it's important to be involved every day, because other than that they don't know. Even in the daycare, some parents have no*

*idea. By talking one-on one, explaining how to do puzzles, recognize alphabets, share toys. Maybe the teachers can incorporate that at the beginning of the year.*

*Usually the foreign immigrants have language communication problems. We are OK in my family because my kids back home were in English. We don't have any problem, but the majority of families are having a problem if their level of English is very low. They don't enrol in the kids program because they are shy, they want to hide themselves.*

### **Transportation Barriers**

A few parents lacked transportation to make the trip into school, or to transport their children to or from after-school activities.

*In certain instances, transportation is also an issue to seek services or to be involved in children's activities.*

*Weather is also a big problem in contacting with the school, especially if you are a newcomer and you don't have access to a car.*

### **Conflict with Sibling Needs**

Families with more than one school-age child face the barrier of multiple demands upon their time. In cases where more than one school event is scheduled at the same time, parents must choose which event to attend. Other times more than one sibling may ask for homework help and parents are forced to prioritise who receives the help.

*Last week at the elementary school they had parent information night for Kindergarten and for Grade 1 on the same night, in different rooms. My husband works out of province, and he wasn't home. So how do you split yourself in two? For me it was very frustrating.*

*If you get homework for five kids, it's a matter of who needs me the most. OK, we didn't get to your spelling tonight, we'll do that tomorrow, because your brother has this big project over here.*

*My son is in Grade 10 and my youngest is in Grade 1. When my Grade 1 son has family literacy night and my Grade 10 son asks me to help with studies, I prefer to help my eldest and miss the parent night because in two years he will enter university and later I can involve with my youngest son. So family circumstances are a barrier.*

### **Barriers to Volunteering**

On the topic of volunteering, a few parents mentioned the demands of the volunteer screening process as a barrier. They would like assistance in the completion of required documentation.

*I want to volunteer at my child's school, but they require so much process work and other documentations. Therefore, I missed many chances of getting involved. I hope that the school can support us to reduce the time for this process.*

*My husband does the ski trip, this year he couldn't go because now you have to have the police check.*

A few parents would volunteer if there were more opportunities within the school setting.

*Because of the lack of activities after school, I can't involve myself much. I would really love to. I even used to be a teacher's assistant in my child's previous schools where there were so many activities.*

*Sometimes I hand in the forms applying for volunteer positions in my child's school. After some time, I ask my child about what happened to the form, but he says he doesn't know. There is also only one chance in a year that the school asks for volunteers. I think that's too little. I really want to get involved in volunteering, but there is no chance.*

### **Selective Involvement**

A few parents are selective in their involvement. In particular, a couple of parents mentioned the sale of chocolates as an activity they preferred not to do.

*Some activities in school, parents should be involved. But sometimes my child brings chocolates from school to sell, and most of the time, relatives and friends are the only buyers. I wish these activities would stop in my child's school. My child doesn't like it either.*

### **Other Barriers**

A few parents mentioned other barriers including health problems, mental stress and weather.

*There is a lot of mental stress and tension in Canadian life for all of us, preventing parents from getting involved with their children's education.*

*Health [is a barrier]. My wife has a lot of health problems and my daughter's autistic.*

*Weather is also a big problem in contacting with the school specially if you are a newcomer and you don't have access to a car.*

### **Do Parents Feel Welcomed at the School?**

When asked whether they felt welcome in the school, parents said they did, with few exceptions. Respondents' views are presented under the following headings:

- School is welcoming
- School is not welcoming
- Parents have a responsibility to be involved regardless of school welcome
- Depends on the staff member
- Not welcomed by other volunteers

### ***School is Welcoming***

Parents are appreciative of the time given to them by school staff and their helpful attitude.  
*Anytime I like to come here, I'm welcome. There is not any problem.*

*I think they welcome and listened to our problem and discuss all the things. The principal gave us 15 minutes. They discussed everything about my child in a very proper manner. They want to cooperate with parents.*

*I have personally experienced that teachers, principal, vice principals are very accessible. It's a great country, beautiful country. The people are helpful and they always give you choices.*

*When I came to Canada last year in June, they said I should go to the school in September and gave me a phone number. When I called the school they invited me to come to school the following day. I said we are coming from Sri Lanka, and they welcomed us with a smiling face.*

*Not only in schools, but also in the bus people smile at you.*

### ***School is Not Welcoming***

When specifically asked if they feel welcome in the school, some parents said they do not. They feel ignored and unheard. Front desk staff members are often the first point of contact and the welcome they extend is considered very important.

*It's just very intimidating. A lot of us are not familiar with the school, and a lot of us are not familiar with the system, and you walk in there, the teachers could be fantastic, but the front desk has never been approachable and I can strongly say that. That's your first impression of the school. Phoning a secretary to make an appointment with a teacher, she may make you comfortable or uncomfortable.*

*They behave little different with other culture. I do not have any benefits. I came to talk about my son's problem, and no help was provided.*

*All the schools are not good; this is one of the exceptions. Most of the schools they simply ignore you. This is my personal experience, and they don't want to listen to you.*

This parent felt their child's teacher discouraged parents from being involved in homework.

*I was helping out with his English, one of his assignments, and his teacher said you shouldn't really do that because you might plagiarize, I got really offended by that. I said well I better not help him any more then. It was almost like she was trying to turn me off to helping him.*

This immigrant parent suggested that a perceived unwelcoming attitude might be a misinterpretation due to cultural differences.

*In our culture, we welcome and talk a lot. When teachers just say “hello” and go, sometimes we feel neglected.*

### ***Depends Upon the Staff Member***

Some parents experience different degrees of welcome from different staff members. Others said that high staff turnover meant it was difficult to connect with the school.

*I've had mixed experiences. I've had some concerns, I call the teacher and they have been very responsive. Other cases, I didn't get a call back.*

*[The welcome] depends on who is the teacher. As a parent when you are going to school to discuss the report card, some of the teachers welcome you and some don't.*

*This year there is a larger teacher turnover and many teachers have left. This year I don't know many teachers, it is hard to connect to them. They don't identify me. It hurts me little but I don't misunderstand them.*

### ***Parents Have a Responsibility to Be Involved***

When discussing the school atmosphere, some parents expressed strong opinions that parents have a responsibility to be involved regardless of other influences. They suggested some parents might use the ‘unwelcome school’ as an excuse not to be more involved.

*I think, if parents want to do anything or involve themselves in school activities, schools really welcome it. Rather it has been observed that parents are not interested and are talking more and doing less or nothing.*

*Parents' involvement is not marginal. It is part of their responsibility towards their children's education and self-esteem.*

### ***Not Welcomed By Other Volunteers***

One immigrant parent sensed discrimination among other volunteers.

*They do welcome [us] but there is a difference. I used to see the same while doing volunteer work, I know discrimination is there and you can see the difference in dealing with mainstream persons and others. They do discriminate...discrimination is there.*

### **How Can Schools Encourage Involvement?**

Parents shared their opinions on ways in which schools can encourage involvement. The following themes emerged:

- Communication
- Scheduled meetings, events
- Satisfied with current involvement
- Incentives and acknowledgement

## **Communication**

Parents said that communication between home and school is crucial to parent involvement. This theme emerged as the most common of all themes in the study. Some parents described helpful communication they had experienced in the past while others suggested ways to improve communication. Desirable types of communication include issuing newsletters, emails, web postings, and notes. As reflected in earlier themes, parents especially appreciate frequent, clearly written, and timely communication with the classroom teacher. Of course they want it delivered by a reliable method. Personal interaction with administrators is also desirable.

*With our school we had an actual envelope that came home each Thursday that had any of the weekly events that the parents needed to be aware of, anything that was coming up, once a month you got the newsletter. And you signed a sheet of paper in there and that helped people stay on track. The child knows, envelope Thursday comes home, parents send it back by Monday.*

*I think the schools should issue a newspaper or newsletter so the parents should know what is going on in the school of all the children. I think it's a better way to communicate to the parents.*

*I think school should have a newsletter on the Internet, not in somebody's backpack, or else you'll never get it.*

*I think the teachers can reach out more to the parents in terms of communicating whether by letters, email or a quick note. That's encouraging.*

Not every parent is looking for more communication.

*I can't see the schools doing a whole lot more than they are already doing. There's huge quantities of information come home at the beginning of the year explaining opportunities. There are a lot of people that don't read it because of the quantity of paper that comes through the door.*

Parents of elementary school students support the regular use of the agenda as a means of communication, but they request the purpose of the agenda be made clear at the outset and that it be used consistently.

*As I was not aware about the purpose of agenda book...the teacher should explain these things to us.*

*You pay \$8 for the agenda at the beginning of the year, but I know that in the first school that agenda came home faithfully every day with stuff in and we had to sign it. But when my eldest son switched schools, the agenda was once in a blue moon. By Grade 5 he was hardly writing in his agenda at all. This year, he hasn't used his agenda not once.*

Day to day, parents want teachers to contact them at the first sign of a struggling student.

*I would say if a teacher sees that there is something wrong, or any strain happened to the child, they should let us know. When my son was in early school years, his teacher discussed with my wife and let us know before we found out something really wrong with him. Maybe it's just because of the relationship with that teacher. She let us know before it was too late.*

*If as a parent I'm expected to help contribute and help support the school, and help support my son's education, I firmly believe I should have been given a phone call saying what's up [when my son was falling behind]. I said to the teacher I'd like you to tell my son what's going to happen if he continues not handing in things.*

Parents are encouraged by personal greetings from the administrators and office staff when they arrive at school and they appreciate invitations to volunteer.

*When we come for shows or whatever, the principal or VP always greets, that's a big thing to me.*

*I think it's just being welcoming over all. ... It starts at the office, when you come into the school, that's where you start.*

*Parents need to feel that they are welcome in school. Thus, the school administration can encourage parents through inviting their parents to help with field trips, school programs, school activities and holiday parties.*

Invitations to participate in school events should be encouraging, but without pressure.

*Schools should avoid overwhelming parents by asking them to attend too many activities. Let them know their participation is welcome, but they won't be criticized if they have to miss some event.*

A couple of parents suggested sending out a survey to ask parents ways in which they would like to be involved.

*[The school board could] conduct surveys see what people are looking for.*

Some high schools make use of the automated telephone system to notify parents of school events and typically parents welcome this communication.

*The monthly newsletter is good, but you read it and if something is happening two three weeks into the month, you may not remember it. At the high school they have the telephone system. It's automated, they ring, almost every night, they have reminders. That's good.*

The use of interpreters is helpful for those parents who are not comfortable with English.

*If the school can provide interpretation services for those parents who have language problem in English, it would be great for parents.*

*Translators help during parent-teacher interviews.*

### ***Scheduled Meetings, Events***

Scheduled meetings, open houses, and other school events were recommended quite often to increase parent involvement. Parents said they need plenty of advance notice of such events, and some would like meetings on a regular schedule. Sometimes parents suggested an orientation meeting would be helpful to newcomers. Some schools have held workshops to help parents understand how to help their children, and appreciative parents requested more of these types of events.

*There should be monthly meetings and if parents give some suggestions it should be implemented so they feel that their suggestions are honoured*

*There should be more open forums with parent-teacher nights, where you could socialize.*

*Meetings should be on the weekend when a lot of parents can come. It will be nice if they could give two weeks notice. So more parents can schedule and come.*

*I hope the school arranges the orientation session at the beginning of the school, so we can get more information about school and my child's learning, for example, the information session about how to apply for universities and colleges and so on.*

*Like the school did a month ago, they can conduct training workshops on how to teach Math and literacy because we don't know the teaching methods in Canada.*

### ***Satisfied with Current Involvement***

Some parents simply stated they were happy with their current level of involvement.

*I am totally satisfied with my involvement.*

*We appreciate the school's initiatives. The school administration is responding to our concerns.*

### ***Incentives and Acknowledgement***

A few parents recommended the use of incentives to increase parental involvement. Others appreciate acknowledgement of their involvement. As an example, this acknowledgment might take the form of bookplates on school library books with a dedication to parent volunteers.

*Volunteer acknowledgement like breakfast or purchase books on your behalf with a sticker, "this book is on behalf of..." so there is a permanent acknowledgement. That demonstrates appreciation. Also, for the parents who cannot volunteer because they are working or busy, a general thank you for showing up to the concerts or open house, that kind of thing.*

*School may begin a program with incentives for children who regularly read to their parents and are read to by their parents.*

## **Parents' Comments on Homework**

This section includes more detail of the many discussions about homework. In general, these parents feel involved in their children's education through helping with homework. Some parents indicated their children had little or no homework, and they see this as a problem.

*It's different than other countries. Usually we are really involved with the kid's studies. We have to help them, they have a lot of homework they have to come back and really work hard at home to do their homework and finish their study. In Canada starting here in primary school, the kids are really having a good life. In primary school they don't have homework.*

*More homework on a daily basis [would encourage involvement]. If children are getting homework on regular basis automatically parents will be involved to help them.*

*According to me children should have assigned homework, maybe it is only one sheet or piece of paper. Otherwise they are not listening to parents they (children) say if we didn't get anything from school then why you are pushing us.*

*Generally speaking, there is a big question mark about the way and attitude of the school, regarding leaving children without homework. This is a serious issue.*

Some parents voiced concerns about the value of the homework their children had been given. One parent objected that mistakes were not corrected, while another felt the subject matter was not broad enough to stimulate their child's development.

*School should give proper homework to children and when they finish homework it should be properly checked by the teachers. Children do lot of mistakes but teachers are not pointing out the same. If teachers are giving homework properly on regular basis then parents will come to know that they have to help their kids and this will help in the process of involvement with kids.*

*For home work they [teachers] are not involving children much in other subjects like science or social studies etc. As I said they pay more attention on literacy and numeracy, use of manipulative is there but I don't see much about mental development.*

A balance in homework was sought by this parent, whose child had experienced unequal amounts of homework through the school year.

*There should be some mechanism to create a balance in students' homework. Sometimes they are very busy with their assignments and sometimes they are not doing anything which is not right.*

According to this parent, the classroom teacher enlightened him/her that homework could take many forms aside from traditional written assignments.

*Moreover, here teachers emphasize most of the time to develop social skills first because of multicultural concept. K.G. and Grade 1 is a growing period and they don't want to stress kids because they think it will affect them negatively. They gave home work according to their age/development. I asked the teacher of my child that he is not getting homework for math and what she told me... math is everywhere! Whenever you go out to travel, grocery store or walking with your child, you can ask mathematical questions. But for us we think only getting sheet or a piece of paper stating homework is only the homework.*

A few parents are not in favour of homework, questioning whether time at school could be better spent.

*I am not in favour of it (forced/compulsory homework by school). Rather I feel happy when they are not getting homework.*

*It's a bit counterproductive to spend eight hours at school, then to turn around and spend another two hours in the evening for another form of education. I think that's great if it just is really impossible for the child to get it in the school day, but there might be some questions we want to ask about what's happening in that school day.*

## **Other Needs and Suggestions**

Specific needs and suggestions not mentioned above are detailed in this section of the report.

## **Parent Teacher Interviews**

Here we report upon comments specific to parent-teacher interviews. Parents complained that interviews were rushed and the setting lacked privacy.

*The time we get [during parent-teacher interviews] is not enough. Keep parent teacher night of different grades on different dates. As on parent teacher nights, teachers are in rush a line up is there. There is no privacy they are all lined up in gym. If teachers don't say but their body language is clear that move people are waiting.*

*I have too little time to talk to the teacher [during parent-teacher interviews].*

*In addition, the environment which the parent-teacher interview takes place is not adequate. For example, a cafeteria is not a quiet or a comfortable area for the interview. The time for the interview is also very short. I feel that the teacher was worn out from meeting so many parents in one or two days. Maybe the school should divide the parent-teacher interviews into few days.*

Participants in the non-English focus groups expressed frustration over positive comments made during interviews which were not reflected in the grades students earned.

*Even when I am contacting teachers they always say everything is good but when we get marks (on report cards) they are very low.*

*During parent-teacher interview, teachers are telling that children are doing excellent but on the other hand when we are getting report cards we usually find very low grades.*

Similarly, some parents wanted teachers to encourage students to aim for higher grades, rather than merely complementing on current achievement.

*In parent-teacher interviews, since my child is with me, that is probably the reason why the teacher only talks about the good sides of my child. They say that "B" is enough, but I want them to encourage my child and say "A" is better next time.*

### **Newcomer Orientation**

In the non-English focus groups, participants suggested some type of newcomer orientation would help parents understand the education system.

*I suggest an orientation session for newcomer families and students all together.*

*I hope the school arranges the orientation session at the beginning of the school so we can get more information about school and my child's learning. For example, [I liked] the information session about how to apply for universities and colleges and so on.*

*There should be some more sessions like [this focus group] in the schools regularly for better awareness and understanding of the education system.*

### **Uniforms**

While outside the scope of the focus group topic, the issue of uniforms was raised in several non-English groups. Some parents feel strongly that uniforms are of benefit in addressing issues of inequality and ensuring appropriate attire.

*Uniforms have a very big role, as the word "uniform" itself means uniformity. So, if children are in uniform that means they are equal. But if you wear brand name then there is differentiation.*

*I want to say that children should have uniforms: otherwise they are creating problems in selection of clothes. Sometime parents are forced to buy expensive things without any logical reason. If they have a uniform then they don't have any choice to argue. School should have uniforms because children, especially girls, spent too much time on the clothing selection.*

## **Extra Help for Children**

A few parents recommended that extra help for their children be provided by the school.

*School should have spoken English classes for newcomer students.*

*For some difficult subjects, if the children get low grades, arranging free tuition would be very helpful.*

*School can give free extra tuition classes. I cannot afford it.*

## **Details of Principals' Focus Groups**

### **Definition of Parent Involvement**

To begin the focus groups, the principals were asked to define parent involvement. This topic evoked considerable discussion in all three groups. It was apparent that these principals had put a great deal of thought into parent involvement. Ideas ranged considerably, with some focused on parents' presence in the school and others focused on less obvious kinds of involvement. As the discussion progressed, principals moved toward a consensus that, although parents' presence in the school is very desirable, the definition of parent involvement is much broader. Principals largely agreed that involvement can simply mean parents' interest and support of their children's school life. Ideally, principals want to see parents entering into a trusting, mutually respectful relationship with the school and understanding what the school is trying to achieve. The parents' role is to advocate for their child through positive communication with teachers.

While an involved parent may chiefly relate to his or her own child, principals hope that parents "care for their child's school, program and community and are willing to support and take part in ensuring its success." Principals recognize, however, that many parents are too busy to be actively involved in school support activities on an ongoing basis. Principals also recognize a difference in how parents can be involved as their children become adolescents needing more independence. However, even in secondary school, principals hope that parents support their children in "getting to school on time, having had breakfast, coming with a lunch, staying for their day, and not calling their child on the cell phone to say 'how are things going, by the way I'm picking up at 3:05 instead of 3:04.'"

### **Trends**

#### ***Financial and Social Problems***

Principals said many families are experiencing more poverty, poorer nutrition, and more social problems. Schools are obliged to come up with new ways to support families who may not have money for trips or even adequate food. Elementary and middle school principals talked about the problems and their strategies to help.

*I'm seeing a number of families not be able to go on trips, so we have to look at how we organize our trips, how we supplement them, how we communicate the purpose, how our Council then supports, rather than collecting money every two weeks, maybe Council's*

*role now shifts to providing for things that we really value.*

*I would say in the last year. I noticed the trend. I don't know, the money just doesn't seem to be there. Parents are splitting up, a trend in family patterns. Divorce can cause financial hardships.*

*Children aren't well nourished. We run a breakfast program in our school, everyday at least 70 children are in there. We've also started an after school program, that essentially provides children with dinner and homework club and physical activity, because they are living in apartments, they are bussed to school, they aren't doing physical activities.*

*I'm seeing a growing number of kids that we're just feeding, because they are not going to get any food if we don't feed them.*

Financial problems are often associated with the immigration experience.

*I think families are over-stressed, financially stressed. In high immigrant communities, the work day is not really an 8 hour day for most people. They are dealing with financial issues, maybe overextending themselves, unemployment is ripe. They come here with degrees galore, been promised the world, and are lucky if they can pick up a minimum wage job with no job security, no benefits, and are trying to provide a life for their children that is reasonable.*

Along with the financial hardship, social problems appear to have become worse.

*I'm noticing parents that require parenting skills, or children who need social work support, could be due to family structure, court orders, or behaviour issues that they are now looking for outside agencies to step in. Since I've been there, there seems to be more and more cases that I'm dealing with.*

*You're trying to communicate and build a relationship with the family, and then you find out that something is going on and you have to call CAS. All of a sudden you have chopped off the relationship. I find that very hard.*

Secondary principals said they also see more social problems with adolescents who may engage in high risk behaviour. According to the principals, there are not enough resources to handle the increase.

*Parents who are in need, to support their children, and there are not agencies available to help them. And they turn to us, and we really do not have the resources, and we turn to our social workers, referrals. ...Once the children get larger, they don't follow the direction any more of their parents. We have a lot of parents that are very shaken and they're not sure what to do. So I think that communication, if there is any way that we can connect with social agencies, that's a huge gap, and a lot of the kids have fallen through those gaps.*

*The big issues, when you look at the kids, there's drugs, sex way too early for children, you know, they are engaging in at risk behaviour, so at home, when they cross the line in the sand, and the parents know it what are parents supposed to do if the kid will not hold to a curfew? ... I think the attendance piece is a reflection of that. So what happens when your kids is skipping classes? A lot of the trends in schools are absolutely directly related to the trends in society...Historically, if you were 16 and not attending, you just went off and got a job. Now we have great numbers of students who are 16 with very few credits. We're trying more and more options, but it's still not enough resources.*

### **Special Needs**

Principals are seeing more need more children with special needs than in the past. In particular, the incidence of autism has grown.

*I've noticed it in the last five years the number of autistic children, and fairly significant expression of it, almost needing an assistant with them for the better part of a day.*

*[I have seen] an increase in the special needs within the schools, whether it's the number of kids that require significant intervention programs, whether it's the growth in autism in the schools, the amount of children in the integrated without support. That's definitely increased.*

### **Parents Are Busy**

Principals see parents being busier than ever before. Reasons for this trend vary. Multiple jobs and relationships with home countries claim parents' time and attention.

*It just seems that more and more they are concerned about their kids being home or not being able to drop their kids off at 8 o'clock. It's been a huge thing this year, they've been on the phone, the sob stories, they are really stuck, they are working shifts, they just don't know what to do. They are taking the transit to Scarborough, they really are stuck. It's really a problem for them.*

*Why are they not coming out? You talk to the kids, and the parents are legitimately engaged in other things. They're working, planning their trip to India, they can't make it on those nights...They'd say they would come and see me if there was a concern so you take it as a backhanded compliment, but you still want them there for the reasons that the kids need them to be involved.*

### **Children's Anxiety**

Principals at all levels also see an increase in anxiety and mental health issues among children.

*Our guidance counsellor speaks about the increase in kids just coming wanting to talk about life. I don't know if it's an economic thing, where is this anxiety coming from in our school. In 7 and 8 we get the adolescent learner, and there is inherent anxiety in that.*

*I'm seeing a huge increase in mental health issues and not nearly enough services, For counselling and assessment, [there may be] eight weeks [wait] when you have children*

*who are majorly melting down - unless a child is saying they are going to commit suicide that day.*

Some children feel tremendous pressure to achieve high marks, even in the very early grades.

*I'm only K-5. This year has been the most forgeries of parent signatures that I've ever seen in my entire career. When it comes back, it's I didn't want to show my mother that I didn't get an A. The anxiety around the I only got a B, I don't want to tell my mom so I printed her name the best I could. (laughter) I just find it amazing that such young children afraid of that. So there is an anxiety.*

### ***Fifth Year High School Students***

Secondary principals noted that more students are returning for a fifth year of high school, and opinions vary on whether this trend is a good thing.

*They've got 30 credits, but they have made no decisions in that fourth year, they are just deferring that decision. It'll get to spring of that 5th year and they still haven't made decisions about going to work, going to college or university, it's draining. That's partly the parents enabling them. Coming back is not necessarily a good thing for them.*

*We're their home, we're safe, it's a good place for them to be until they can sort out their life. We need to be that safety net and haven.*

### ***Other Trends***

A few principals described other changes that they have observed. Not surprisingly they noted the changing cultural mix of families in Peel Region. Other trends include more transience as newcomer families try to settle, or when families break up, or when children move among foster homes. Noted also were trends in parents' behaviour: trying to be a friend rather than disciplinarian, a growing sense of entitlement, and an unwillingness to let children experience failure. Some parents screen phone calls from the school. Single mentions of trends included increased attendance problems, better out-reach by schools, and more technology. One principal felt that things have not really changed that much in 20 years.

## **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

### ***Lack of Communication***

When principals were asked to name barriers to parent involvement, lack of communication was mentioned most often. They regret that students often do not deliver communication pieces to their parents or tell their parents what is happening at school.

*I'm wondering how many read the newsletter, how many take the newsletter home? It's difficult to know whether the parents are reading those things.*

*Also, we do agenda communication a lot. The teacher says the assignment is not done, but then the child says to the parent, no it's done. So then it becomes, like, who are you going to believe. And for the most part they believe their child.*

When communication does reach parents, they may not understand the special terminology used by educators.

*We change the language. They are in high school for two years in Grade 9 and 10 and they choose academic or applied, and then all of a sudden for some reason we change language for 11 and 12 and now everyone has to figure out what does this mean, and what's the connection between this language and that language. Whether parents grew up in Ontario or came from elsewhere, I think it's very complicated and unfamiliar to parents. I think it's a huge barrier in terms of the way they structure themselves.*

*At parent night, that parent is talking to four teachers who are using different types of assessment pieces, different types of way they deliver their program. Some pieces would be appropriate, but it's still a difficult conversation.*

### ***Language Barrier for Newcomers***

Of course, principals recognize that many parents find it hard to communicate because they do not speak English.

*We can't assume the newsletter is reaching everyone, because they don't speak English. The reality is we don't have financial backing to translate everything that we send home. So we have to get really creative in how we share messages with our parents so they are involved.*

*I had one strange language I had never heard of. There was a child, new to the school, I had to announce it on the system, if there is a child in the building who speaks the language? I was surprised, someone did come. I knew we didn't have any teachers. I can't remember the language, but there was a child in the building who spoke that. We were so shocked. We hang on to that kid since then. It was really helpful. It is a big barrier. That's why they're not coming in, asking questions, not answering phones.*

### ***Parents' Negative Feelings about School***

Contributing to communication problems, some parents feel intimidated by schools. This feeling may be connected to the immigrant experience or may stem from past experiences with schools and authorities.

*A lot of them are intimidated to come in the door. They don't feel that comfortable calling because their student has to translate for them, and they don't understand what you're saying. It's difficult.*

*[Some parents think] we're racist in schools and we don't support them, so to even to have dialogues with those folks is difficult.*

*I've found particularly at this new school, parents who have really negative experiences with authority or school. ... You have to speak very gently and you have can't be bossy, or come across as an authority figure because they just respond so negatively to that. They*

*have had some really negative times, and they don't respect authority. They are afraid of CAS, they are afraid of the school, afraid of the police, they're very defensive. I think that's a barrier. You can tell they don't like school.*

Principals think some parents are just tired of hearing that their child is not achieving well.

*Perhaps parents are somewhat intimidated about parent-teacher night, to spend another night to hear bad news about Johnny or Suzy, which we've probably known since Grade 2.*

### **Older Students' Growing Independence**

By the time children reach middle school, they typically discourage their parents from being involved.

*I think it changes over the years. As a former junior school principal, we had many parents involved in many different ways. Sometimes the kids don't want the parents involved as [they get older], and sometimes the parents think, ah they're OK, we don't need to be involved.*

*Your teenage kids don't want their parents involved so they don't take the memos home, they don't tell them things, they erase the messages that are on the phone. But I do think parents in their heart they want to be involved, but we have to improve our communication strategies.*

*They are not engaged with adults, they want to be a different from us as possible. They really want to be complete separate from us, and particularly their parents.*

### **Social Inequality**

Principals also recognize that parents come from a range of economic circumstances and these differences can hinder involvement.

*With my school it's the haves and the have-nots. ...Always remembering that when we are doing anything at the school, that we take a look at both sides. I will have parents come up with some grandiose ideas as fundraisers, and you need to bring them back to reality. Yes, you can afford that; however let's look at some other pockets within our demographics who cannot afford that. For us that's a huge barrier.*

### **School System/Cultural Differences**

Principals see involvement being hindered by differences between home countries and Canada.

*Many of the parents don't understand the Canadian educational system, so that's a huge change. We're bringing them in so they can understand.*

*We have 30-40% of our kids on a vacation back to India. Since we've started keeping statistics, that you can take a look at it, you can see that child's been gone from October and coming back in May. When you think about trends in your school and why kids are*

*or are not learning, the involvement barrier to me is not understanding the significance of the Canadian education system, which is very different from the system in India.*

*One is in the values or beliefs that parents have around public education and how that ties to religion. We always feel this come November, December when we are starting to plan our holiday concert. Some people can handle that very well, when the message comes out in our newsletter that we're trying to invite different cultural groups and different religious groups to come in and we try to understand a little bit more about their religions. But when you have people who are very devout in one faith or another and are intolerant to other things, that becomes quite a stressor and a barrier to inviting them to concerts and performances and times of the year where you are showcasing the diversity and acknowledging the different faiths in your schools.*

### **Transience**

The trend of increasing transience is seen as a major barrier to parent involvement.

*If parents and kids are moving in and out, the connection to the school has to be built up new every time.*

*I think the transiency case [is a barrier] for those social risk communities. It's not unusual for a child to be in five schools in two or three years.*

Even the separation of elementary and middle schools can act as barrier to building relationships with parents because the time in middle school can be as little as two years.

*At our school a clear barrier is that it's a 7 and 8 school. I get them in, get to know them and then it's sayonara. It's difficult in that sense, just the sheer movement from that process.*

### **Other Barriers**

Principals also mentioned several other barriers: lack of meaningfulness in School Council involvement, overly demanding process for volunteering, lack of certainty on how to be involved, and transportation issues.

### **Successful Strategies to Encourage Involvement**

When asked to describe successful strategies they have used to encourage involvement, principals related a broad variety of efforts. The strongest theme was the need to attract parents into the school. There was a general feeling that an enjoyable experience through school events and programs encourages other kinds of involvement. At all levels, principals agreed that positive events were most successful at bringing parents out.

*Parents are like all of us. We all like the good news, the good news pieces. They are very happy to support that. If you look at our society, we're all looking for good things to be involved in.*

Ongoing programs where parents attend with their children are attractive to parents of

elementary school children.

*We have a program that runs for kindergarten parents. They come in for eight weeks in the spring and 8 weeks in the fall for learning with their kids and high school students. The parents come in and learn part of what's going on in the class while their kids are doing activities, and then they take part in those activities together, supervised by high school kids. That's how we've gotten them in the school. We don't get them in through Parent Council.*

*Those who went on to Grade 9 have been coming back, reading to the younger kids. There's no child there without an adult. So we had it every two weeks, but we found that when we went to every week, the momentum went bigger. It just breeds success among everyone.*

Events where children perform or both parents and children can join in together are always very well attended.

*When they come and their child is doing something at the school, if it's an open house, a concert, you get 90% of the parents coming. Whenever we try and think of things to do at our school, to involve parents. It always has to involve the children because the parents feel there is a purpose for coming, because it is about their child, their most important precious commodity. If it's EQAO presentation night, we have the parents come in with their children, we get a whole room full.*

*We had a night where the parents and the child could come in and do the climbing up with the child, and there were some parents there that I have never set eyes on. We have a dance group in our school, and they were teaching dance to any parent that was interested.*

It can be helpful to use incentives for students to bring their parents.

*We tried something last year for Grade 8 parents night where one of the feeder schools provided a pizza party to the class that got the most parents out. It made a huge difference. So this year they did all three feeder schools. They had 600 people out.*

Events that educate parents about issues that directly concern their child are attractive.

*One event was on filling out option sheets for kids. That brought out Grade 8 parents. That definitely drew parents out. Having one of post-secondary options was another one where we were able to get parents out. Those targeted meetings draw in parents that wouldn't necessarily come out.*

*Usually we get a better turn out to conferences and shows, but those are things that are related directly to your child.*

At such events, it helps if newcomers are specifically accommodated.

*At our last parent night, facilitated through settlement workers we had translators. There were 200 parents attended, and we held it in the gym. We were talking about real stuff [how children proceed through levels].*

*A lot come with education but are not employed within their fields. They are really keen to find out about the Canadian system and what's going on they come when they can when they are not working. But sometimes they send their grandparents to attend. We have something called multi-fest; it's like a huge pot-luck. The parents bring in their dish, the students do the entertainment, we sit around, have a conversation and find out what's going on in the community.*

Principals attested to the way positive events can lead to newcomer parents' wanting to volunteer.

*We had our first parent conference, bringing in parents and businesses to see how we could better accommodate them. We had teachers talking about how to help child, concerns, how to get child involved in the community. Through the parent conference we got a lot of involvement. For the first time we didn't have to ask parents to come in just to help out in the school, we have a lot of volunteers. That parent conference gave them the confidence to know they are welcome in the school. That really opened up my parent council. We began to look at issues pertaining to them, especially my new parents from Somalia.*

*We were amazed at the number of people attended the parent conference. We went from 8-1pm, but I was still there at 3pm because I couldn't get rid of the parents. We had council who spoke in Punjabi. We had the Ethiopian, Somalian, spoke to their group, and encouraged them to come out. That really allowed parents in, almost every class has a parent volunteer.*

## **Communication**

Having identified lack of communication as a barrier, principals stressed the need for communication with parents. The importance of personal conversations was raised often. Some principals make a strong effort to develop relationships with parents.

*It all comes back to relationships. It's how we try to personalize the education system, which is an impersonal system. So our job in school is to try and personalize every youngster in how we connect with them and how we connect to parents. We continually try to do that.*

*The role of vice-principals and principals is to make the eye contact, make one on one conversation, every opportunity you can. You hear through the community how that positive message comes back*

*So the vice-principals and I walk to school every Wednesday and once a month we offer coffee and treats in part of our school that is quite nice and the parents come in, but the most powerful part of that is that we walk out to the community, go walking in a different part, so for 20 minutes before school we go out and meet the kids who are walking to school and introduce ourselves. Then once a month we have the coffee morning. They meet and chat and bring in some of those people from the flagpole, and some of the other people who may not have come in. Some of the dads work on shift work, so it's a great way for them to meet each other and for us to meet them.*

In a smaller elementary school, parents can be reached more easily as parents accompany their children to school.

*I find that if you can start building that relationship right from the get go, by asking how their weekend was, they start to develop a trust in you. When you start to need things in your school, you say, how would you like to come in on Friday? I'd really like some help on hot dog day. Invariably the answer is always yes, it's just getting that comfort level and the tone within your building.*

Principals feel that settlement workers provide a very important personal service that encourages a trusting relationship with the school.

*I have to give credit. The multicultural settlement workers are making specific inroads in my community with contacting parents, making parents understand what should be going on, checking agendas, parent interview evening. They're doing a really good job at that. It's really successful.*

Parents who are already involved can help other parents connect with the school.

*The more the individual parents see their neighbours involved in the school, they come out to be part of it now.*

*My Council parent, who is very active, very popular and well known, she gets out there and gets the word spread. Every time we have something, we have so many people. We have so many parents volunteering in the classrooms.*

These principals had made a special effort to communicate with parents in order to learn about and celebrate their cultures.

*They really like to see that we're learning about them. We've had a panel where different cultures shared different ways that they show respect, and then we sent the survey home, we got it all back, we compiled it all, and now we've got a book.*

*In one of our PD sessions, we went to a mosque. So not only did all the kids know we went there, the mosque is looking at these teachers care enough to come and listen to what's going on.*

It was noted that multiple and creative methods of communication are needed to encourage involvement.

*We have to get really creative in how we share messages with our parents so they are involved.*

*One of the things we did this year is the kids created their own newspaper, and I email the information to parents.*

*Our Parent Council did a survey on interview night, and they got parents to do the survey right there. The feedback they got was about the communication. As a school council, they felt they should be doing more, and they started an email list. They are using the board address, so it's still controlled by the board. They send out reminder letters. I put things on the website, and they also have a section for the website.*

*I do think parents in their heart they want to be involved, but we have to improve our communication strategies.*

*One of the strategies I've been using is, whenever I'm having any kind of event, I sent out invitations to my feeder schools, to my incoming Grade 5 students. I make sure I'm at the front door all evening to meet those people, so I can invite them to come back.*

Better communication with the grandparents, who are often the main caregivers for children, may be fruitful.

*There's a group of people that we could work with, in terms of the grandpas who are walking these kids to school, and then going to the park to visit with each other. If we could get those folks in the building there are things we could be doing to get support from them, they are all good people.*

As the discussion progressed, this principal proposed that schools may need to communicate their expectations of parents more clearly.

*We need to be more articulate about what the ideal looks like. As a principal, have I ever really said, here's how I'd like you as parents to be involved. It would be an interesting exercise, knowing that there is a huge range of what involvement can look like.*

## **Community Partnerships and Outreach**

The practice of cooperating with community organizations has helped schools reach parents. Collaborations have included providing space for Parks and Recreation programs, government funded tutoring, computer classes for parents, reading programs with the public library, and promotion of Scouting.

*We've got Parks and Rec coming in. For \$15, the parents get ten weeks of after school programming from 3:00 - 5:30 once a week. So we have it Monday and Thursday, so I'm*

*often there, so I talk to parents when they are picking their kids up. Fabulous. We get huge demand for that. And tutoring, we're doing the government funded tutoring, a great way to meet the parents, meet the parents needs. They want all their kids to be successful so you're helping the kids who are the neediest. And we're offering computer classes for the parents through the library, so the parents will come in. It's just a onetime class, but at least you've made a partnership with the library and you're meeting a onetime need.*

*[The scouts were at our parent conference.] A lot of our kids got involved in boy scouts and girl guides, so they really recruited quite a few children. We had Brampton Library come in and told how they could come in and get books. That was big information for them. We talked about our father and son program we have that they can read to their children.*

## **Teacher PD**

Some principals have made a special effort to ensure that all teachers understand the importance of parent involvement and employ strategies to increase it.

*One of the things I've learned is the need to work with staff around parent involvement, and to consciously make that part of every staff meeting. Not part of their ALP particularly, but in the fireside chats and talks, what specific strategies are you using, and not particularly written ones, because our community won't necessarily understand English. But what strategies are you using to reach out to the parents and depending on the site I've been at that can be a considerable amount of time educating staff, because there would still be a fairly small group of people that their job would be to teach, and that's what they do. Well, no, in this day and age there's the public relations piece and you can't help the kid without working with the family. So a very key strategy is devoting sometime around professional development taking a look at that. I learned you couldn't assume that was happening with every teacher, unless you make it a conscious part of your success plan.*

*This year I was very descriptive second term about who are the students that we need to flag to encourage parents in for interviews. I literally said in our weekly memo that I send to staff, if this child fits this profile you should be calling the parents and inviting them in as opposed to just sending the letter.*

## **Specific Parent Involvement Initiatives**

At some schools, principals have made parent involvement a very specific focus, encouraging increased involvement over time.

*We've been building it up since 2004. At the beginning it's communication, setting up the website, getting out newsletters. After time, we ask staff to include the parental involvement piece in there, what do you want parents to do with their kids at home, here's some applications of things you can do with your child that supports what we're doing in the classroom, rather than sheets of busy work. This year the focus is to get parents more*

*involved. Each grade level has their own initiative that they're going after to get the parents involved. As a school we're doing a lot with the dual language books because we have 34 languages. Most of our parents don't speak English.*

*You get them at kindergarten, that's why the kindergarten intervention program is so important. Most of the time for parents this is their first experience, they are more nervous than their child is, and they will do anything to make sure that that child is happy at school. That's when they want to participate in things, they want to talk to the teacher, they have occasion to talk to the teacher every day.*

*We did this program that we've been running, it's called PIE (Parent Involvement as Educators) and it's put out through York University, taking a look at first language learners, their parents, and working with their kids in the schools. We start it in kindergarten and pre-kindergarten.*

### **Understanding Parent's Needs**

Although this theme was reflected in other themes, the idea of researching and meeting parents' needs was specifically addressed by some principals.

*One idea I used at my previous school and this school, is to do a very visual simple parent survey, I always have it at meet the teacher.... What do you want for your child's future, and how can the school help....it was really powerful information for the teachers, that the parents had very high expectations for their children, they wanted the world for them.*

*If you find out what your parents need, and you get to know your community you can provide special events, printed information, or an evening with a translator. We did one evening on evaluation and we had the biggest crowd that the school has ever had other than for an open house.*

### **Details of Teacher Focus Groups and Survey Comments**

Themes that emerged in the open-ended comments on the survey were similar to those the focus groups. Therefore, to correctly reflect the emphasis teachers placed on these themes, open-ended survey comments were coded along with the focus group transcripts. In addition, this summary includes references to parents and principals' views in order to show where there is agreement. Where warranted, reference is made to grade level. Note that there were proportionately fewer secondary than K-8 teachers in the focus groups and among the survey respondents. Therefore less emphasis on some themes by secondary teachers could be a result of less "air time."

### **Teachers' Definition of Parent Involvement**

In the focus groups teachers were asked to define parent involvement. Teachers viewed parent involvement in much the same way as principals did. Ideally, parents are involved in a positive relationship with the school, focussed on a common goal to support student success. Teachers

recognised that parents' busy lives may restrict their involvement during the school day, but they valued parent support at home, especially the modelling of positive behaviours and attitudes.

*You're supporting your student, you're also supporting the teacher, you understand what we're doing, and if you don't understand you're going to go and find out more.*

*There are a lot of flavours to involvement, clearly. Some parents can be deeply involved, you may never see some parents and yet they can be deeply involved.*

*But also modelling is important. It's not only supervising but parent involvement is modelling for your child how you would like to be.*

This elementary school teacher considered parents' roles in school readiness to be an important component in parental involvement.

*Parent involvement is before they even get to school, when they are ages 1-5, when they are learning the sound and letters of the alphabet, or learning to put on their pants, or getting ready for school.*

On the other hand, in the elementary focus groups, teachers spoke about ways parents are involved which have a negative impact on their child's education. Homework was one area where teachers felt some parents were negatively involved to the extent of completing homework for their children.

*I have a lot of parents who, even in kindergarten, will do the child's homework.*

*First term I sent homework home, then I realised they were all coming back A+, A+, A+, but in the classroom the kids were Bs and Cs students ... if your child was doing their own work at home then I could send homework home.*

This sentiment was echoed by some survey respondents.

*When helping with homework there is a fine line between helping and doing.*

A narrow definition of involvement spelled frustration for some elementary school teachers, who felt parent involvement should be defined more broadly than attendance at parent events or amount of money fundraised.

*At the previous school, speaking to teachers about parent involvement, the definition of involvement was very limited to "parents care if they came to the open house" and the two or three events that we held during the year.*

*My own children have been out of school for a while. I found that at one school, parent involvement was interpreted as how much you could fundraise for the school. To me that was a warped sense of involvement.*

## Importance of Parent Involvement

Across all focus groups, teachers agreed that parent involvement in their children's education is very important. According to teachers, students are more likely to achieve success at the middle and high school levels if their parents are involved.

*It makes a huge difference in the child's success, a huge difference. In terms of establishing a routine at home where they come home, maybe have something to eat, and a parent is there to say, don't turn on that video game right now, let's do our homework first.*

*It makes the curriculum and the learning relevant; it bridges it together to work it into their home.*

*[The students] tend to work more if they know their parents are communicating with the teacher, that's what I've observed.*

*Ultimately students need to be accountable to their parents, that sense of responsibility, that ownership of their education. That attitude needs to come from home. We're limited, if that's not reinforced at home, as teachers whatever we say will not be effective at all.-*

Teachers in higher grades expressed disappointment at the extent of parent involvement.

*A parent's involvement is as necessary as a kid needs that support. At the secondary level I see that being not what I, as a teacher, need it to be.*

*I'm disappointed to see the level of parental involvement.*

*As a secondary school teacher it is very difficult to get parents to be involved with their children's education. I truly believe that simply encouraging parents to become involved would be beneficial.*

However, according to one middle school teacher, not all teachers welcome parent involvement.

*I know feel very positively about parent involvement, and [some teachers] seek it out. They are comfortable with parent volunteers in their room, whereas other teachers when you talk about parent involvement you see the rolling of the eyes and either they have had a negative experience with involved parents or they just seem to have a different perspective in terms of the value of parent involvement.*

Even though this elementary school teacher viewed involvement positively, s/he felt "bombarded by parents."

*Generally, despite the fact you're being bombarded by parents, I think we all agree parent involvement is very valuable, it's helpful, the more the better, if they can be in the classroom, or go on a trip, or do things for you at home. We all agree that's the way to go.*

In the survey, many respondents reiterated the importance of parent involvement through their final comments.

*Parent involvement and understanding/support for the school and classroom is critical for student success.*

*Parent involvement is essential for effective learning - without parental support, the teacher is fighting an uphill battle.*

Nonetheless, through survey comments secondary teachers suggested that ideal parent involvement at the secondary level differs from earlier grades. Parents need to adopt a supportive role and allow their children to become increasingly independent.

*Parents need to support their children at the secondary level, but also realize that their children are young adults and should be self-advocating.*

*I think that by senior high (grades 11-12), there comes a time when boys and girls must let go of the apron strings of the parents and stand on their own.*

*I believe that parents should give advice with regard to student's subject choices in high school but students should have the final say. Unfortunately, many parents discourage students from taking subjects they love i.e. arts for subjects like science because they feel these will be more useful.*

## **Teacher Frustration**

A number of comments revealed a sense of frustration that some parents are either not involved or are inappropriately involved. In the teachers' view, inappropriate involvement includes completing homework, making excuses for the child, not supporting the teacher when problems arise, and non-response to teacher communication. Teachers described how some parents see education as entirely the teachers' responsibility while some are over-involved.

*Parents have told me it is the teacher's responsibility to teach, not mine. If their child struggles the solution is to get a tutor rather than take the time to help their child. Parents often do not respond appropriately to notes or read agendas. We are still trying to get our parents to read and sign the agenda daily so they know what we are doing in class and in the school. At interviews parents have complained that they do not know what their child is doing at school. My response is lets look at their agenda. We write in it daily about what we are doing in various subjects, tests, and events at school. We have cancelled trips due to a lack of volunteers. I wish the parents were as involved as they say they are*

*It's great for parents to help with homework in areas such as reviewing notes, study for quizzes and tests. It's definitely not OK for parents to do their child's homework. They're not doing their child any favours. Parents need to take responsibility for ensuring work is*

*completed, especially after being contacted by the teacher. It's not OK for parents to attack the teacher when report card marks are low because their child couldn't be bothered to do their work.*

*Parents need to be supportive when teachers call home for help with an in-school issue. Often we call home about a problem, and the parents are either defensive or apathetic to the issue involving their children. This does not help.*

*Parents are too involved in fundraising. Our school has too much fundraising and this imposes challenges on teachers to constantly be collecting monies sometimes on a daily basis -- staff does not usually hear about where the money has gone nor how much they have raised .....*

## **Trends**

When asked about trends in parent involvement, teachers noted a decrease in parent involvement in their children's education. Some teachers see parents as being busier than ever, a situation described by the principals. Teachers recognised that newcomers are especially busy, often working more than one job. One high school teacher commented that turnout at interview night has decreased in recent years. At the secondary level, teachers noted that the desire for material goods has increased and widespread use of personal technology such as cell phones and iPods interferes with instructional time.

*I see a lot more stressors on parents these days, the working, especially a lot of newcomers, juggling so many jobs.*

*What I'm finding today, parents aren't as involved. Especially in the community I'm in, they question everything that comes home, they are not going through with signing the agenda.*

*I see a downward spiral from ever since I started at [high school]. When I started there eight years ago, I would easy get well close to sixty parents a night, and it's gone down to a handful. I don't know what to attribute that to.*

*I agree we are now in a materialistic world. It has trickled down from the top to our children. I say that as a guidance counsellor, I find a lot of students, especially the Grade 12's who are failing, they are failing because they are working part-time, they are being exploited, they are taking the night-shift so they can't make it to school. Why are you working? I need money to purchase a car for college or university. Well you're not going to get there if you're failing. When you say that, they have never thought about that connection before. Where is the parent involvement in this?*

*One of the biggest trends I deal with is all the technology. How do you compete? Their attention span is so low, you've got iPods and texting, I'm constantly checking that.*

## Communication Strategies Teachers Employ

Teachers were asked how they typically go about communicating with parents. Recall that both parents and principals identified communication between home and school as a crucial aspect of parent involvement. In addition, many teachers commented on communication strategies in the survey. The themes which emerged from the teacher data are listed below.

- Personal conversations
- Newsletters and notes home
- Agendas
- Websites
- Email
- Multiple languages
- Settlement worker involved
- Multiple methods

### *Personal Conversations*

In the focus groups and survey, personal conversations emerged as the single most important strategy used by teachers to encourage parent involvement in their children's education. Principals also emphasized the importance of personal conversations as a communication strategy. In the early grades, many teachers have daily face-to-face contact with parents as they drop off and pick up their children, but some will make a point of calling as well. At the high school level, teachers are more likely to conduct personal conversations by phone.

*Because I teach kindergarten and I get to see most of the parents every day, I often have the opportunity to talk to them for a few minutes.*

*I used to make a point of calling every student parent once a month. Also, as a grade 2 teacher, I could just dismiss my kids, but I still go down with them [to meet with parents].*

*It's one thing to send home a newsletter...but that personal conversation you have with that family member, huge difference.*

Reasons for calling home vary but generally teachers call home in response to concerns such as student absence or misbehaviour.

*I will typically contact a parent for students that are missing and things. For example, if a student has been missing for a week, I'll call up, say I'm sorry your son or daughter is away, the information on this unit is available on the 'My Class' site, give them the link, and they can at least catch up if they need to.*

*...are you only calling that parent for negative reasons? And I think more often that happens.*

On the other hand, some teachers stressed the need to contact parents for positive reasons, setting an encouraging tone for future communication.

*I knock [on the parents'] doors, because I call them. I got a new student two days ago. I just called the mother, I welcome your child.*

From the survey, some teachers cited 'good news' phone calls as their personal best strategy for encouraging parent involvement.

*I call home a lot - sunshine calls are the most important thing to foster good parent/teacher relationships.*

*I make phone calls to parents with good news. This is especially important for students who may require a phone call home to report problems. The good news call allows a positive rapport to be established.*

*Telephone calls mostly happen with negatively based situations but on the occasion that I have had time...a good news phone call has always been met with thanks and appreciation.*

### ***Newsletters and Notes Home***

Across all grade levels, teachers rely upon newsletters and regular notes home to communicate with parents. Many teachers mentioned newsletters as a best school strategy for encouraging involvement, and others use newsletters and notes home as their best personal strategy. Newsletters may be sent out on a regular schedule, or may coincide with specific events such as at the end of an instructional unit. Typically in earlier grades, such written communication is more frequent.

*The school newsletter goes out once a month. That's a paper newsletter. It's given to the student to take home. I think it's also web-based as well, on the school site.*

*My daughter has a weekly calendar and a monthly calendar. There's many small words, they write what's going on every day in the classroom. It's easy for me. She's in Grade 1.*

*When I do a unit, I'll write up a little template, this is what we did, and there's a little section at the bottom about your child. That goes home after every unit.*

Notes sent home on a fairly regular basis are common.

*Sending stuff home, whether you have an assessment folder and the parents sign the test, we all have different things we do, but to me it's just such a critical piece, parents need to know how they can help their child.*

*I send daily all my duotangs home, just so the parents can keep in touch, with whatever was done in class.*

Some teachers have developed strategies to secure parents' interest in reading newsletters. For example, they may have elementary and middle school students write the class newsletter themselves, providing both a learning opportunity and increased engagement of both parents and children. In other schools classes rotate responsibility for writing the school-wide newsletter.

Typically, teachers include detailed information on upcoming events, invitations to come into class and suggestions on how to get involved in their newsletters.

*We have a lot of kids writing for [our newsletter]. We do a lot of projects, things that are outside, so they are constantly taking pictures with the digital camera, not very expensive, they take a picture, they do a tiny little write up. That becomes the front page, it's very engaging, kids are looking forward to reading it, parents find out what's going on*

*Some administrators ask, this month it's the Grade 1s turn [to write the newsletter] and this month it's Grade 2, it's different at every site.*

*I don't want to send home a newsletter that says blah blah blah, mine are specific, we're working on geometry, graphing, I give them suggestions this is how you can help.*

Of course, parents can benefit from the newsletter only if it reaches them and they can read the language in which it's written.

*In my school you might get a monthly calendar as part of the newsletter, but it's making sure that that goes home. That doesn't always go home for them to read it.*

*It's one thing to send home a newsletter, but first of all if they don't read the language, you know...*

### **Agendas**

Agendas are seen as a good tool for communication, particularly by teachers in the primary/junior divisions. At this level, teachers typically use agendas to give daily updates and positive feedback messages, and parents can respond in kind. Similar to 'sunshine' phone calls, teachers send good news notes home via the agenda.

*We can use the agendas [to communicate]. Just say, wow what a great job they did today.*

*What I use the agendas for is to communicate homework, what's going on in the school, and to check them daily and write notes "don't forget this", "so-and-so lost his shoe" and those were just daily things.*

*I use the agenda too. I write a little note in the agenda, and say I would like to meet you. I've written letters and good notes home, "I'm very happy that so-and-so is doing well." I've given them little awards, little stickers. Those are all messages.*

The effectiveness of agendas in communication relates directly to how they are used; focus group participants emphasized that agendas are not used the same way by all teachers and may not be used at all. Parents may not always be responsive. However, teachers do utilize agendas regularly when encouraged to do so by school policy.

*I'm sure we all have the experience where teachers may be using them in the classroom, but either the students are forgetting, or maybe the parents are not signing them at home.*

*I think agendas are only as good as they are being used at both ends. I know there are teachers who tell the kids to write something down, but they are never checking the agenda. So how do they know if the parent wrote anything?*

*In the school I was in, we had all the school using the agenda. It's consistent.*

Training parents and children to use the agenda requires consistency and vigilance.

*I check to make sure everyone has written their homework in their agendas, what I'm hoping the parent will do as my partner is they will ask the child to open their agendas at night and they will say, so have we done number one, have we done number two and they will sign that yes they have seen it and yes the child has done it.*

*We do have an agenda that every child has in our school. Depending on which classroom you're in there are certain expectations in our school and whether the teacher believes in it or not, and how much time you spend reinforcing the skills. Some of the children are very stubborn and some of the parents are very stubborn.*

Agenda use decreases at higher grades. Middle school teachers ask the students to take more responsibility for keeping the agenda updated, using it less often as a method for communicating with parents. At secondary school, lack of agenda use might be a lost opportunity to develop professional skills.

*I know a lot of teachers in middle school use [the agenda] as a tool to teach the children independence. It's a tool where the child has to take responsibility in recording their items down, due dates, homework.*

*Agendas are very big in the elementary school, but once they get to high school unless they carry a day planner, there is no onus on them using it. I think that's a missed skill. I think professionals use day planners to keep on track, and students fall on that path.*

### **Websites**

Communication via website was mentioned by teachers at all grade levels, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some think websites are a great communication method; others do not favour their use as a means of communicating with parents because the onus is on parents to check the website.

*I think websites are an easy way for teachers to communicate with parents.*

*We have a 'My Class' site, which is a Grade 9 based site. A lot of the assignments we have are posted on the web. So they are all web-based. I communicate with the parents that the assignments are all there*

*I'm not convinced that websites are all that useful. It's a very active thing you have to do.*

*The 'My Class' is not an effective tool. I have a very good my-class site, I tell [parents] "please refer to my site for additional resources" but I don't think parents are content in terms of reading information off the web or communicating.*

Teachers appreciate the multiple language information available at the board website. However, many find school websites to be outdated and teacher websites time-consuming to update.

*On the [Peel Board] website, [the brochure] talks about if you are going for an interview, here are some things you can think about ahead of time. ...they have it in English and in different languages as well.*

*I find a lot of [school websites] don't have enough information. If you look at a school's website, it's outdated, there's a newsletter from 2006 posted up there, and I think parents would have access to it, I think it would be a good thing to communicate for parents.*

*I am the network manager at my school. All school websites get updated from the Board, for example the H1N1 virus. Updating the website takes less than 5 minutes a week for me, it's not a great effort. However, having said that, my class site is not very effective for communicating with the parents.*

Survey respondents more often suggested use of websites as a personal than school strategy, although some website supporters recommended both.

*With PDSB provision of school websites and teacher website (MY CLASS), both can provide extensive opportunities for schools and each individual teacher to provide parents with information, resources, and encourage parent involvement in their children's education.*

*Using a class website to post assignment/project details and worksheets eliminates the breakdown in communication when children do not write project/assignment details into agenda or lose worksheets. Working parents like the flexibility to check the website when they have the time or when there is a homework issue in the evening.*

### **Email**

Despite the protocol barriers mentioned earlier under Barriers, some teachers prefer email as communication tool. In the focus groups, teachers in elementary and high schools mentioned email as a convenient, foremost method of transferring information to and from parents. At the same time, teachers are cautious to send only positive messages and to keep records of their messages.

*I want one point of communication. For me it's email.*

*I do the emails as well because in my busy world and in their busy world emails communicate more effectively for me. Anything negative, of course, we don't go on email, it's only the positive good stuff and reminders.*

*There are reasons why you want to be careful in an email. But even so, email communication*

*to me, it gets to a parent faster than waiting for a phone call follow up which can take days, weeks, or even a year.*

*What's nice about the board server is that it's official so it looks good. It's also saved, there are records being kept.*

Through the open comments on the survey, teachers reiterated the value of using email to communicate. Email is a first choice alternative to making phone calls for some teachers because it is much more efficient. Some requested more convenient access to email.

*Through the use of email, I can contact a plethora of parents during a planning time for both positive and negative reasons. During a planning time when using the phone, it is difficult to contact more than 5 parents.*

*We need a secure "e-mail platform" [no idea about what this looks like!] through which we can connect with parents regarding student issues.*

*Setting up an "email link" on teacher websites would be a helpful tool.*

*I would really like to be able to email parents. If I had a parent list of all my students in my class I could send out a quick daily email about homework/assignments and that would ensure that parents got the messages. This would be very quick and convenient for me and I would do this all the time.*

### **Multiple Languages**

Recognising language as a barrier, teachers at all grade levels value opportunities to communicate in multiple languages. Schools use various strategies, for example, dual language letters, interviews in other languages, students as translators for parents and signage in different languages.

*It's important to have things communicated in different languages so parents can feel they are a central part of their child's education.*

*In our school we have interpretation of letters that go home in dual language.*

*This year I'm very fortunate to have a partner who speaks Punjabi. ... when we interview together, we're interviewing two classes, 54 parents, and I get so far and the parents are glazed over, as soon as my partner starts talking, they come alive.*

*There was another thing, one school I went to I just liked it so much. They put the signs on everything in three languages. They looked at the population, and if there was an office, there was a sign in three languages: English, Hindi and Punjabi.*

At the Peel District School Board website, teachers can access and print information for parents which has been translated into various languages.

*The board site has everything in different languages. You can see those students are in this language, all things you can pull those out, print them, and give it to them. So you can feel comfortable reading and understanding what the information is all about.*

### **Multiple Methods**

Some teachers recommend using multiple methods of communication to capture a broader audience.

*Informing parents in a way that the message gets across loud and clear is very crucial. This can be done through information sessions, parent meetings, phone calls, communication envelope, school website, etc.*

*Get the message out in a variety of ways*

*[My best personal strategy is] communicating consistently and regularly using a variety of media -- agendas/notes home, class website, phone calls, monthly newsletters.*

### **Settlement Worker Involved**

In the middle school focus groups, teachers spoke about the benefits of settlement workers' participation in parent communication. Not all schools have settlement workers, but where available they are very helpful in assisting immigrant families settle in to the school.

*The settlement worker has helped immensely. I had an instance where a child had dental problems and couldn't learn because of his dental problems. His mother said, "it's in your head, it's nothing." It turned out she didn't have the money to take him to the dentist, and she didn't realise the service was free.*

*What we found worked well was to organize a program right at the beginning of school with the settlement worker; it's called information for our newcomers. So all the basic things, how to open the locks, how to use the agenda, we told them everything, school numbers for the parents in the school itself. The turnout was very good. The parents were feeling good. Now they talk to the teacher, but the settlement worker really worked a lot for these parents.*

*We don't have [a settlement worker], we don't have enough students.*

### **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

In order to probe the nature of barriers from the teachers' perspective, the types named by parents were presented to the teachers for comment. The quotations below were taken mainly from the focus groups. However, the order of the list reflects the over all emphasis that teachers placed on particular barriers in the focus groups and survey combined

1. Parents are busy /working
2. Parents don't understand the education system
3. Communication barriers
4. Language barriers

5. Barriers to volunteering
6. Lack of confidence/intimidated
7. Parent attitudes/cultural differences
8. Teachers don't have enough time
9. Student absences
10. Older students' growing independence
11. Teachers as parents
12. Lack of diversity among teachers

### ***Busy Life/Working***

Teachers confirmed parents' views on a key barrier, specifically that work or other responsibilities mean parents are too busy to be more involved in their children's education. This theme arose at all grade levels. Parents working shift work or multiple jobs are not available to come into school and are difficult to reach by phone.

*Speaking from my own experience, some of the parents are on shift work, so if the school is always offering activities in the afternoon or evening, you're already dismissing that group of parents that cannot come.*

*You can't get the parent, you call in the morning they are on their way to work, you call in the evening they are on their way home from work, or they are eating and you can't get hold of them.*

*I find that part of the reason we're not seeing parents involved, at least at my school, is because they've got two jobs, they are sleeping during the day.*

*[Parents] are working long hours, multiple jobs, multiple families in their homes, maybe they lack control in their homes depending on what their background is.*

While teachers at all grade levels recognized and sympathised with parents' busy lives, they also commented that parents nevertheless have a responsibility to be involved in their children's education.

*You also have to make an effort to find the time to meet the teacher, as a parent you can make it. The teachers are trying to make the time for 35 students. So as a parent it's also my duty to take off some time and meet the teacher.*

*I understand that parents work and have commitments, but having children is a commitment.*

Survey respondents also cited parents' busy lives as a barrier to parent involvement.

*Parents are not able to help because they are at work or they are too busy taking their kids to organized activities outside of school, doing groceries, laundry, etc.*

### ***Parents Don't Understand the Education System***

In the parent focus groups, recall that immigrants noted many ways in which the Ontario educational system was alien to their homeland experiences. Similarly, teachers across all grade levels felt that parents' lack of understanding of the current approach to education is a barrier to involvement. However, this lack of understanding is not exclusive to immigrant parents. Changes in the Ontario curriculum, report card system, and teaching methods mean that parents from all backgrounds struggle to understand what their children are doing in school.

*I think the biggest barrier is the understanding of the parents, how we teach in our schools. They are so used to the textbooks.*

*The report card language is not straight forward. Parents don't know.*

*We're taking a different approach to doing the curriculum. Even though our parents are not by and large first generation Canadian, they are seeing a disconnect between the way that we're trying to implement the curriculum and the way that they had the curriculum implemented for them. Where's the map?*

*I actually got into teaching thinking about parents like me who felt lost. ... I think we're not doing enough to communicate with parents to understand that things are done a little differently.*

An immigrant teacher emphasized, as did parents, the vast difference between the education system in her home country and Ontario's system.

*You can't believe, you guys (non-immigrants) can't even imagine. There's a huge, huge difference in the education system for sure. I can't just right now say it in a few words.*

A few teachers in elementary and middle school teachers said that parents do not always recognise that teachers in Canada do not depend solely upon textbooks for instruction. Furthermore, one teacher regarded textbooks as a 'security blanket' for parents.

*I can speak to India because that is where I went to school. You have a textbook and you know, you literally buy that book, and the teacher says we're doing chapter four next week and the parents do it at home before the kid even comes in. So the big gap is they are not getting those textbooks, so they do not know what to teach.*

*The textbook issue, at least from the middle school point of view, is the security blanket for some of our parents, to be able to go to chapter one, then chapter two because that is how they have learned. In Canadian education it's quite different. We all know that we rarely do follow something through step by step. In fact we are discouraged from doing that.*

At the secondary level, newcomer parents may be dependent upon their children for information about the education system and this lack of direct information may hinder their involvement.

*I think, when we're talking about new immigrant families, there's a fear, parents don't know how high school works here. Ultimately their kids are the ones who understand how high school works. So they are so dependent on their children because their access may not be informing them on how this society works, or how the school system works, or how this new environment works for them.*

Parents from diverse cultural backgrounds might not recognise the responsibility expected by Canadian teachers.

*In some ethnic demographics the parents believe it is the school's responsibility to educate the child. They don't see themselves as having that responsibility in the child's life.*

Survey respondents added the idea that some parents may have had negative experiences which restrict their positive involvement.

*For some parents, attitudes towards the education system in general can be a barrier. These attitudes may have a variety of sources, such as their own childhood experiences, family attitudes or experiences in other countries.*

### **Communication Barriers**

Across all school levels, teachers identified various communication barriers which impede parent involvement. Many see the special terminology they use as a problem. Language used in curriculum documents, report cards and newsletters came under fire.

*Even our curriculum, if we could break it down into a simple language, a person could go to the Ministry website and get a quick snapshot of what the curriculum is. Even us, when I look at my curriculum it takes me a good 10 minutes to figure out how am I going to integrate this?*

*I think the language [in report cards] is too much coming out of the curriculum. As an example, if they said they did integers, integers mean positive and negative numbers, parents don't know what an integer is.*

*Our student report card is written right now with a lot of words that don't express exactly what the student is doing.*

*[As an immigrant] I have 25 families, relatives here. Nobody knows the meaning of that stuff. They always come to me to explain. All the relatives are calling, "we are coming with report card, just tell us what it means."*

*The school newsletter is often written in a language too complicated for many parents to read, no matter what their language of origin.*

Educator jargon was mentioned as a barrier to communication by many survey respondents.

*The prevalence of jargon in the profession is hugely detrimental to our ability to communicate with parents*

*Teachers need to abandon jargon.*

In addition, this teacher felt strongly that report cards did not reach home in a timely manner as a result of the lengthy report card process.

*Parents need to know that by the time they see the report card it's already a month old. Because we've been working on it, then it goes to the office, then it gets read, so by the time you send the bloody thing home it's old news.*

Teachers commented on the need to communicate to immigrant parents their role in their children's education. Conversely, teachers need to recognise cultural differences lead to different expectations for parent involvement.

*[Parents] are thinking they can go to school only at certain times. It's a culture shock when they come from another country, different reasons. Information is missing there; it's a gap between school and home.*

*For lots of cultures it's not something that's done; they wouldn't meet the teacher. I think we need to be more informed in that regard. That needs to get out to the whole spectrum of teachers.*

As mentioned by principals, teachers echoed the sentiment that students often do not deliver communication pieces to their parents.

*In my school you might get a monthly calendar as part of the newsletter, but it's making sure that that goes home. That doesn't always go home for them to read it*

Recall that parents who wanted timely communication expressed frustration at their inability to connect with classroom teachers. Indeed, parents do have difficulty contacting teachers and teachers themselves are busy, acknowledged by these survey respondents.

*Teachers do not get back to parents regarding phone messages, notes. Teachers are hard to contact.*

*As a teacher, we do not always have the time or the opportunities to regularly communicate with the parents.*

At all focus groups, teachers expressed concerns over protocol regarding email. Despite cautions about using email to contact parents, some teachers feel strongly that email is a useful communication tool as it is hard to reach parents by phone.

*There's also other ways of communicating. Board-wide, we're not supposed to use our email, but I do use my email.*

*There is a board policy around email, that they be answered in a timely fashion, but also that it doesn't include personal information or information of a sensitive nature so there's a board*

*policy. Many teachers are discouraged from using email by our federation. You know, things can be altered and changed.*

*One of the issues was more political than anything. That has to do with communication, and emails, how you word things to a parent. We're cautioned on using language that is such that can be shown to be detrimental. So when you're trying to communicate through an email on the progress of student, it can be not necessarily clear. It's more wishy-washy, you're more generalizing.*

According to survey respondents, teachers are sometimes limited in their ability to contact parents due to a lack of phone access, private space, or current contact numbers for parents.

*Parents are sometimes reluctant to contact me (guidance) as they must first go through our secretary. I do not have an extension nor do I have voice mail and this inhibits parents from calling and/or leaving messages of a personal nature.*

*Teachers require a location in the school to hold private parent phone calls. There is not one location in our school that is consistently available to contact parents.*

### **Language Barriers**

Teachers agreed with parents and principals that language is a barrier to those parents whose first language is not English. Language barriers impede all types of communication, newsletters and interviews in particular.

*I think, cultural and language-based barriers are probably huge for Peel. The student probably has a better grasp of the English language than a lot of the parents, if they are immigrants*

*It's one thing to send home a newsletter, but first of all if they don't read the language, you know...*

*My husband speaks another language. English is not his first language, and he always felt uncomfortable going to the school. He said they might ask questions, I don't know how to answer them, he says "I don't go to the interviews."*

For parents with limited English, just trying to communicate can be a risk.

*Some parents don't speak English and they want to get involved. They want participate, they want to support their children, and sometimes parent involvement... is just taking that risk of trying to communicate with the ESL teacher or the teacher even if they don't speak English.*

Telephone conversations and parent-teacher interviews are also hindered by language barriers, as described in these survey comments.

*I have had a number of instances in which I have phoned home to discuss a student's progress and have been hung up on due to a language barrier.*

*Language in my school is a barrier for many. I write messages in the agenda and the student tells me most of the time, my parents can't read English. I need an interpreter for parent interviews.*

### ***Barriers to Volunteering***

In the elementary focus groups, teachers described the criminal record check as a barrier to volunteering in school. The process is time-consuming, may require a fee, and can be particularly intimidating for immigrant parents. Once completed, the paperwork may take weeks to reach the school. Although teachers recognised the need the check the records for volunteers, they wished for the process to be streamlined.

*The criminal record check is another reason why the parents don't come because it takes time.*

*[The criminal record check is] a barrier, a huge barrier, but it's a good barrier.*

*We don't make it easy for them to volunteer. They have to get a police check, they have to take it to Brampton, we're not making it easy for them to come in.*

*One other thing about getting parents into the school, something that's a big huge barrier is criminal record checks. It takes 8-10 weeks to get it, they don't know where the police station is, so why am I going to go do that when it's going to take me that much time.*

### ***Lack of Confidence/Intimidated***

Whereas parents cited lack of confidence as a barrier to involvement, teachers at all grade levels described school as 'intimidating' to parents. In essence, they are talking about the same thing.

*Sometimes parents can be very intimidated to be involved, depending upon the culture.*

*It's a fine balance of parents not feeling attacked. There are a lot of confident teachers out there that will tell you as it is, this student is struggling, and parents will tend to feel very attacked.*

*Many parents are afraid. They feel marginalized. They're scared, they don't feel comfortable.*

Parents who speak English as a second language have an additional reason to lack confidence in communicating with teachers, and their children may discourage communication out of fear of embarrassment.

*It's hard when a parent feels their English is inadequate.*

*From my personal experience, talks with my relatives...they said that they are just scared to talk to the teacher. Sometimes the kids says, oh mom, you can't talk properly with my teacher.*

At the secondary level, parents face a further obstacle because their children have multiple teachers who change with each semester, thus increasing the sense of intimidation.

*I've had conversations with Grade 9 parents, who, at the secondary level there are four teachers per semester, there's not one person. They feel very intimidated because every semester there are new teachers.*

Teachers used the open comments on the survey to reiterate this theme.

*I think intimidation is a big factor. Teachers and parents don't feel like they belong to the same community.*

### ***Teachers Don't Have Enough Time***

Some teachers at elementary and middle school level felt they could do more to encourage parent involvement if they had more time to organize daily communication. Time spent on report cards was a source of complaint.

*Time is a barrier as well. A lot of us fall into that pattern of addressing the struggling student and the struggling family. As much as I value this, I still fall into that rut. That's a real thing for teachers, were very busy, the curriculum is so demanding.*

*The hours we spend on report cards, wouldn't you rather we spend that time with parents?*  
A survey respondent described how lack of time forced the teachers to suspend the monthly reading night at their school.

*We used to have a monthly family reading night at our school but it has dropped off as it takes a lot of personal time.*

### ***Student Absences and Transience***

Maintaining consistent school/home relationships is a particular challenge in areas where students are withdrawn from school for extended periods, according to teachers in elementary and middle schools. Students may be absent for weeks or months at a time while they vacation abroad.

*We have a lot of transitional students where they would go on vacation and have to be de-admitted and they have to come back again. So the secretaries are short with them. "Here's the paperwork again, you have to register, again, don't go on vacation any more is the message because it's a hassle." And they do it every year.*

*Parents who are going back to their countries for three or four months, they need to know very clearly how much harm they are doing to their children. They come back and the gaps are huge. They are too busy, they are travelling, and it's good to have fun, but keep in mind your child's education.*

Likewise, students who are sent abroad to live with relatives until they reach school age arrive in Canada unprepared for their grade level.

*What is happening in our community, both parents are working, they give birth to the child and they send the child to India for 6-7 years. I received one student last year in Grade 3, May and in Grade 4 he didn't know his ABCs.*

As principals mentioned, teachers say that student transience can impede parent involvement.

*Parent involvement is very important. However if a school is located in a transient neighbourhood with families that do not speak English it is highly unlikely that they will have the time or desire to become involved in their children's school.*

### ***Older Students' Growing Independence***

Agreeing with parents and principals, middle and high school teachers confirmed that by the time children reach middle school they typically prefer their parents not be visibly involved.

*As soon as they get to Grade 9 it's not cool in your circle of friends to have your parent come in, so mom, dad, you've got to drop me at the door. Our parents are as involved as they are allowed to be by our students.*

*Middle school students discourage their parents from showing up, it's true, but it depends on what kind of evening we're inviting parents in to see.*

*[In secondary school] if the student is trying to manage the communication and keep the parents out, it's a straight line to lack of credit success.*

### ***Teachers as Parents***

Being a teacher makes it quite difficult for some to be involved as a parent, as mentioned by elementary and middle school teachers. For example, teacher-parents are not available to go into school during the day to participate in trips or attend assemblies.

*My question is this, if there are parents who are also teachers in the school board, how is it possible that they could go on a school trip? How is it possible that they can get involved?*

*Even myself, trying to go in, I'm a teacher in this board and we believe in parent involvement, but to get to some assembly for my child to present, it's a major undertaking to get there and it be meaningful.*

### ***Lack of Diversity Among Teachers***

According to high school teachers, parents might be more involved if staff were more representative of the diverse community within Peel Region.

*I was thinking of another barrier. In school we don't have true representation of the staff according to the population.*

*I also think a staff at a school should be representative of the student population. I teach at a brown school and our teachers are predominantly white.*

## Successful Strategies to Encourage Involvement

When asked what strategies they recommend to encourage involvement, teachers in the focus groups described a variety of approaches. Three themes emerged strongly:

- engage in personal conversations
- host special events and programs
- provide a welcoming environment

Themes which emerged less strongly:

- invite parents into class
- understand parents' needs
- educate parents on their role in their children's education
- miscellaneous

### *Engage in Personal Conversations*

Echoing their answers to the question about typical use, teachers from all divisions recommended personal conversations the most. On the survey, it was named as best personal strategy much more often than any other. Some teachers make an effort to connect personally with all parents at the beginning of the year, easing the pathway for later communication. Others will contact parents personally to discuss particular issues. Survey respondents indicated that engaging in personal conversations was the single best personal strategy to encourage parent involvement.

*My practice is to phone all my students families the first week of the semester. I'm successful maybe 75-80%.*

*I know the parents by first name, and when I don't get [signed notes] back, there's my phone.*

*I just say "You need to come in and talk, when are you free?" This is what we're going to do. That's what I do with all the kids, there's no choice here.*

*I had a kid in my class whose mother obviously had a very negative school experience. So the principal and I met with the mother, at the Tim Horton's at the apartment building. Instead of making her come to the school, we came to her. And we had the personal conversation and the kid knew I was meeting with mom. It was great meeting from that day forward you would see the student success climbing*

### *Host Special Events and Programs*

Teachers agreed with principals that hosting special events or programs can be successful in attracting parents into school. Teacher survey respondents indicated that special events and programs are the single best school strategy for encouraging parent involvement. This strategy is particularly popular at the elementary and middle school levels. Literacy hour, fitness nights, school orientation and welcome days are examples of successful events.

*I do a literacy hour for new kindergarten parents. The parents hear a speaker, listen to a story, have a snack, make a craft.... I did it during my lunch.*

*We have family fitness night, we have family literacy night, we have welcome day kindergarten, where you see groups of family there with their children. As each one of the nights progresses through the year you see the parents more involved.*

*Parent nights and literacy are extremely helpful in bringing the parents more into the fold and letting them know, what that math program looks like where there's no text book. Even the parents that don't come, the parents that do come go back to the apartments and they are all talking in the hall.*

*There's orientation for grade 8 and grade 9 parents on how the technology works for our school.*

*Starting this year with new students we do an in-depth tour with the parent and child before they start at the school. And every single parent says thank you so much.*

Teachers have to be creative in encouraging families into the school for special events. For example, grandparents can take part in events by reading with students from dual language books. Community networking is another way to encourage families to attend.

*In our school we have the family reading nights. And we invited grandparents to come because these are the caregivers after school for a lot of these families. Grandparents are home and they don't speak English. We tried to show them that even though you don't speak English we have dual language books, there are other ways to still support your grandchildren and feel like you're welcome and part of the school.*

*[We have facilitated] networking among parents who share the same language, for example, if your child says [to the parent] there's nobody coming in who's dressed like you. Well if the community is set up, there's a whole bunch of parents who are going in.*

### ***Provide a Welcoming Environment***

A welcoming environment is a key element in encouraging parent involvement, according to elementary and middle school teachers in the focus groups. Survey respondents ranked a welcoming environment as an important personal and school strategy very highly after specific communication strategies (newsletters, agendas, websites). Right from first contact, teachers aim to set a positive tone. A simple strategy such as offering culturally familiar foods at special events can help welcome parents into the school.

*That first initial contact with the parent or caregiver, the tone is set. The parents know ... the expectations as part of the school climate or culture, and it's a partnership. The teacher and parents have a role to play and those roles are clearly defined, through the agenda, protocols, so everyone is on the same page.*

*I think it is also important have a safe environment where parents feel safe to go and ask the teachers and to know if they have specific questions who can they go to.*

*I always put out samosas, and the parents would come in, and there was a smile on their face. Even if they didn't eat the samosa it was a familiar food from their cultural group. So I know we talk about the superficial, the saris, samosas, steel bands, but that is definitely a stepping point, you have to have at least that and then go on to the next level.*

Some see that secondary schools could do more to welcome parents.

*In secondary schools, parent involvement is not encouraged by teachers or by the students themselves. There needs to be a more invitational culture created at secondary beginning with a shift in attitude by secondary school teachers. Too often children are openly embarrassed by public exposure of parent involvement, perpetuating student uneasiness regarding the development of these very important relationships.*

Administrators play a crucial role in promoting a positive school culture where parent involvement is valued.

*I feel that administrators do really set the tone as to what involvement can look like at their school, at the same time respecting different types of cultures.*

### ***Invite Parents into Class***

At the elementary and middle school level, teachers invite parents into the classroom. This tactic was identified by some teachers as their best personal strategy. Expertise can be shared within the classroom. Teachers model behaviour for parents; parents can share their working skills with students.

*I've had parents say to me I'm not sure how to help my child. I say to them, come in and spend a morning with us. Watch what I do, I model it. I have parents say "Thanks so much for letting me come in, now I know what to do."*

*I had a grade 7 class, and I had a student's dad come in, and he was a professional photographer. He came in and did an hour on the science and art part of it.*

### ***Understand Parents' Needs***

As mentioned by principals, teachers felt that understanding parents' needs was important in facilitating involvement. Meeting parents' needs emerged as a best personal and best school strategy for a few teacher survey respondents.

*I feel we should question whether we do we do the things that the parents really want or things that we value as important?*

*We as teachers have to do a better job to promote the resources out there, and if somebody doesn't want an interpreter, maybe somebody on staff can help interpret.*

### ***Educate Parents on their Role***

In the focus groups, teachers described how taking the time to educate parents on their role, be they new kindergarten parents or new immigrant parents, can set the stage for future

involvement.

*I think our job as kindergarten teachers. I do a lot of educating parents. I've had parents ask me "when is my child going to have to do a project." Well, in kindergarten a project would be to sit on the carpet, keep your hands to yourselves, show respect to your teacher by being a good listener. So it's about educating the parents and once they feel educated enough and their comfort level improves a bit, that's when you're going to get parent involvement.*

This teacher praised the work of settlement workers who now educate parents during intakes.

*The settlement worker [at the Welcome Centre] is educating the parents, while the students is doing the testing to decide their place in the secondary schools, as to their function in this society in the Canadian context and telling the parents that the system here is different to there, and they should not close the door when the kids go to school and say it's the teachers responsibility. A lot of that awareness happens over the summer with new intakes of students coming from other countries. I thought that was a step in the right direction in terms of educating parents of their role.*

Although this theme did not emerge as a best personal or school strategy, survey respondents did mention this theme through their final comments.

*We need to go out into the community to talk to parents - at local faith buildings, the mall, etc. and speak their language to help them understand the importance of involvement. schools have amazing things going on for parents. It is just a matter of educating the community as to what is available and why it is important and they will come.*

*It would be great if we could offer parents some sessions on how to be involved with their children's education. Issues like homework expectations, importance of routines, how much help to give your child with homework, volunteer opportunities, etc. could be discussed.*

Some teachers recommended this Ministry of Education website which provides guidance for parents on how to help their children.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/abc123/eng/>

## Details of Teacher Survey Findings

This section contains the results of the teacher survey. Over the grade levels and years of experience, responses followed similar patterns. The final comments section and “other” sections reflected the themes from the focus groups. Therefore, in order to show the over all emphasis that teachers placed on themes, the comments were coded and reported along with the focus group results.

### Characteristics of Survey Respondents

The various grade levels (Figure 1) were well represented with 49% of teachers working mainly with grades K-5 (primary and junior divisions), 22% with grades 6-8 (middle school), and 29% with grades 9-12 (secondary school). Although the survey was intended chiefly for classroom teachers, a few administrators (.4%) and a small number of other school staff (4.2%) responded. For the sake of simplicity, all respondents are included under the term “teachers” for the purposes of this report. Respondents represented the full range of teaching experience, with a strong showing of those with 10 years’ experience or less (58%).

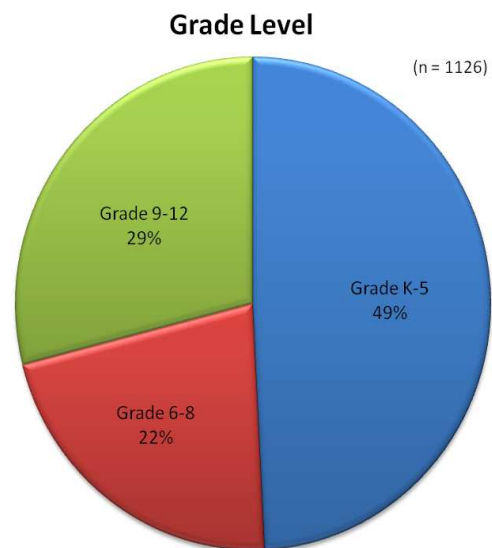
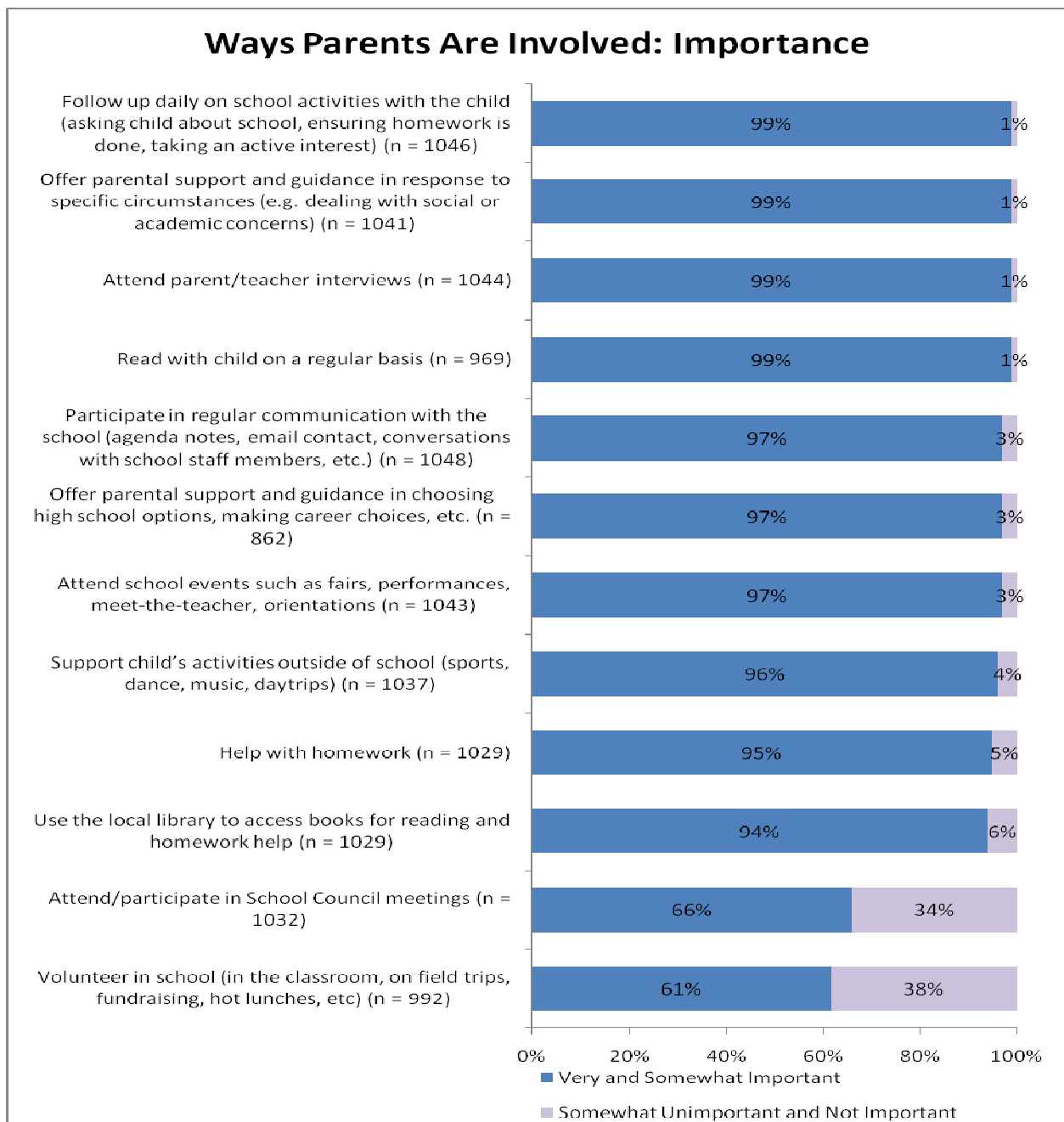


Figure 1: Grade Level

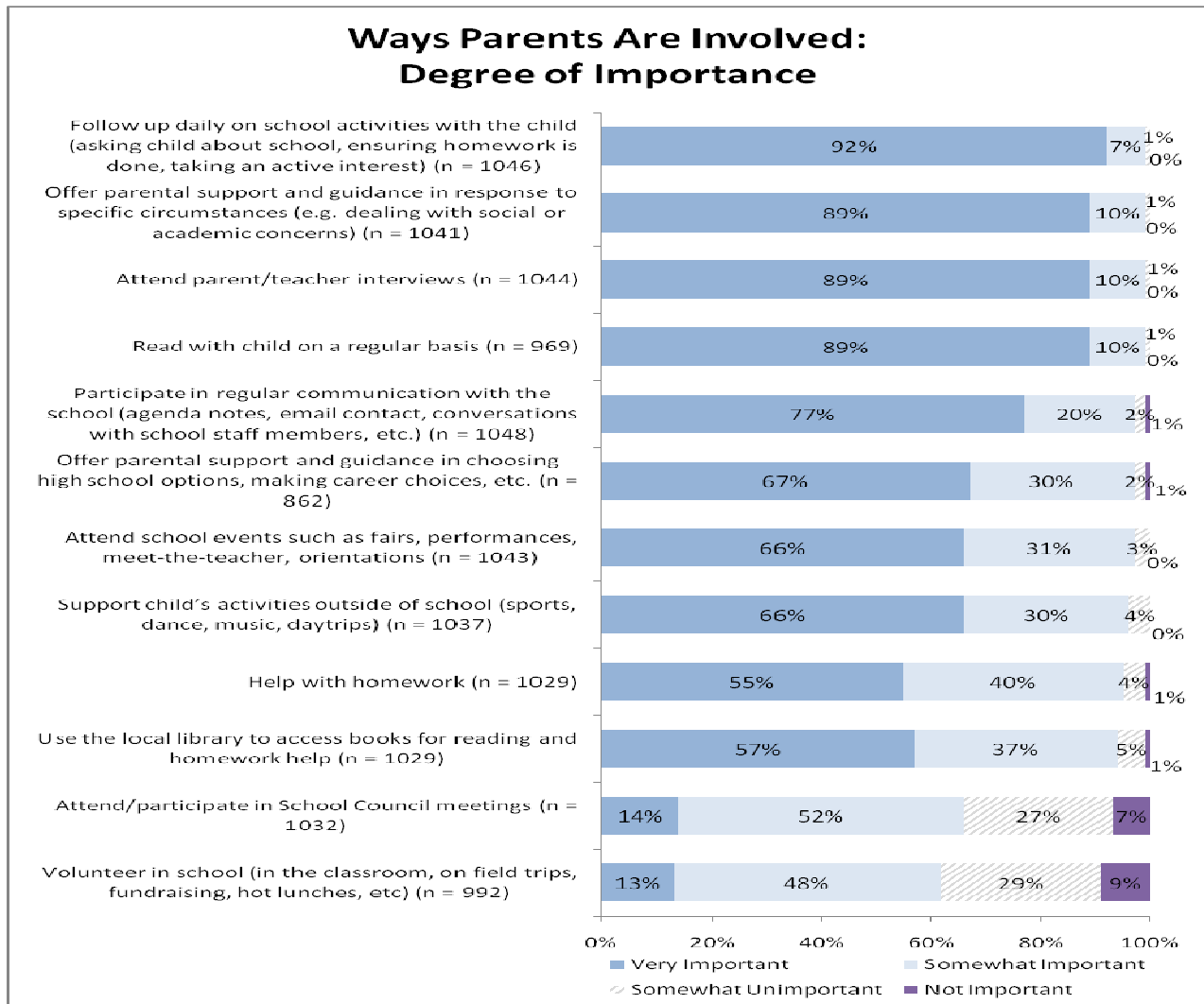
## Teacher’s Preferred Types of Parent Involvement

Figure 2 shows how teachers rated each type of involvement, arranged by descending order of importance. The darker bars show the percentage of respondents who answered ‘very important’ and ‘somewhat important’ to each of the statements. Looking at the graph as a whole, we can see that the majority of teachers rated all types of parent involvement as important. Looking at types individually, we see an overwhelming support for ten of twelve types (94% to 99%). This strong endorsement of parent involvement matches the high valuing by focus group participants across this study, both parents and educators.



**Figure 2: Ways Parents Are Involved: Importance**

Breaking the results down further (Figure 3), we see that educators chose the highest rating of “very important” most of the time. Daily follow-up of school activities came at the top (92%), revealing values similar to those of parents, who said they engage in this type of involvement most of all. The next three types also received a very high rating (89% very important): support and guidance in response to specific circumstances, attendance at parent/teacher interviews, and reading with children on a regular basis. With support and guidance, again we see a similarity between parents’ and educators’ values; parents talked often about this way of being involved. However, unlike the teachers, parents generally were not enthusiastic about parent/teacher interviews. Reading with children is high on the teachers’ list and we saw that parents talked about this often in the focus groups.



**Figure 3: Ways Parents Are Involved: Degree of Importance**

Communication other than parent/teacher interviews came next with 77% “very important” ratings. We see here that teachers highly value communicating with parents, just as parents told us they value communicating with teachers. Recall that parents talked about communication more than anything else in the focus groups.

Teachers rated the next three types almost the same: offering support and guidance in course and career decisions (67%), attending school events (66%), and supporting the child's activities outside of school (66%). Help with homework received fewer 'very important' ratings (55%). This lesser emphasis on homework assistance may be fortunate as parents described a number of barriers to offering this type of support. Note many teachers still want parents to take their children to the library.

Least valued by teachers were School Council meetings and volunteering, rated as very important at only 13% and 14% respectively. It is probably both fortunate and realistic that this is the case, given that parents described many barriers that limit their ability to participate in these activities.

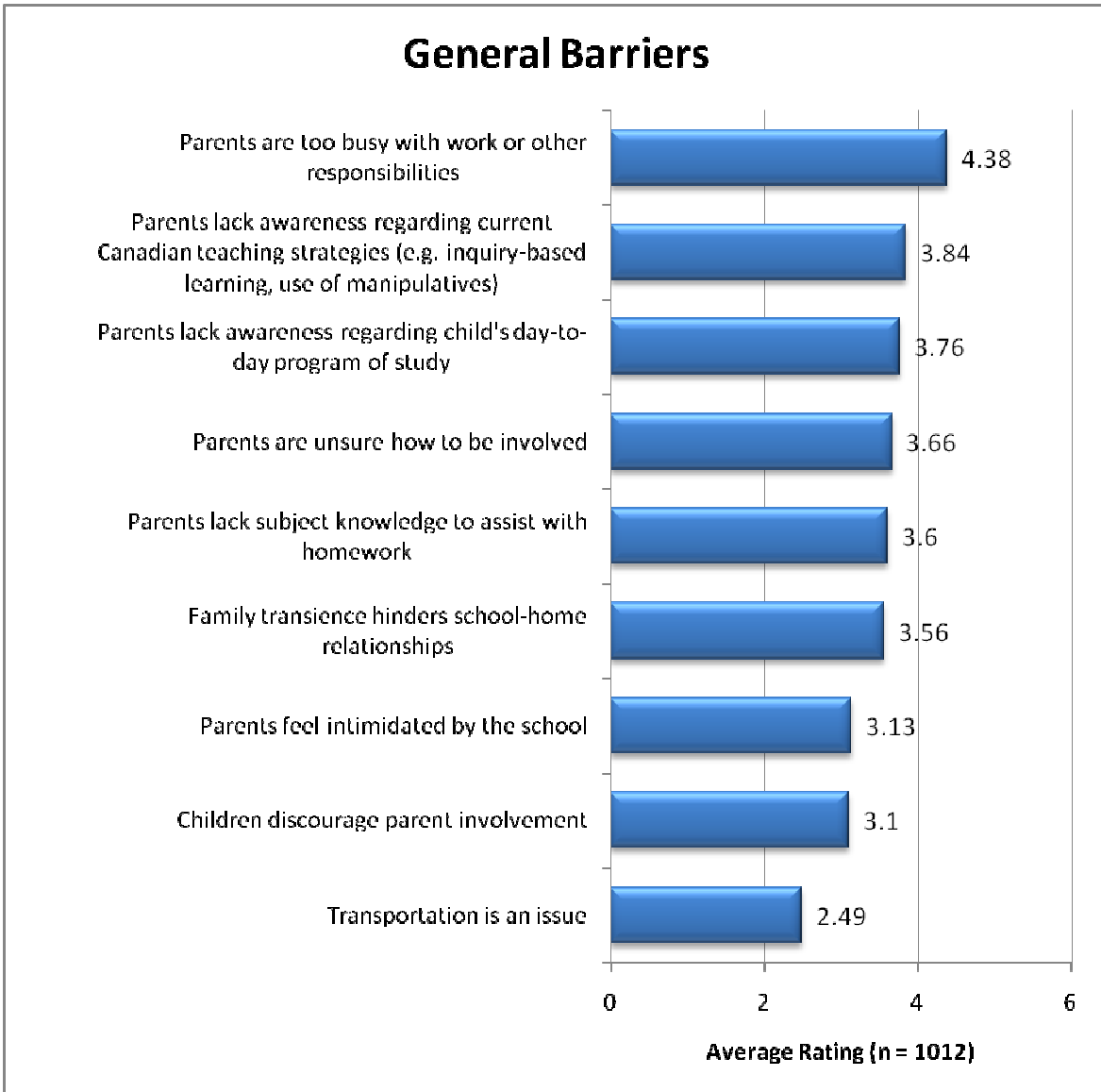
## **Barriers**

The next question asked teachers to rate the significance of barriers that parents, principals and teachers had mentioned in the focus groups. The barriers were divided into three categories: general, communication, and volunteering.

### **General Barriers**

Under general barriers (Figure 4), educators thought the most significant barrier was parents' busy work life and other responsibilities (4.38 average score on a five point scale). Here we see agreement with parents, who talked most about this type of barrier in the focus groups. Not far behind, the next five barriers received almost equal ratings from teachers (3.56 to 3.84). Four of these are along similar "knowledge" themes, that is, parents may have trouble understanding the teaching methods or day-to-day program of study, don't know how become involved, or lack knowledge to help with homework. These themes largely match what the parents told us in the focus groups about their knowledge gaps. Still within this set of almost equally rated barriers, family transience was seen as a problem by teachers. This theme was introduced by principals in the focus groups.

Teachers rated the barrier "parents feel intimidated by the school" next (3.13). Recall that principals and settlement workers said this is a common barrier, and some parents said they lacked confidence to approach the school. Teacher rated children's discouragement of parental involvement almost the same (3.1). Recall that parents, especially of children in secondary school, discussed this problem quite often. Teachers rated transportation problems as the least important general barrier, but still substantial at 2.49, and parents also mentioned this problem.



**Figure 4: General Barriers**

## Communication Barriers

Teachers rated all communication barriers (Figure 5) as almost equally significant (3.08 to 3.89). First is the issue of language barriers (3.89), echoing the focus group results. Next is the problem that communication sent with children often doesn't reach home (3.78). Recall that principals said this was a considerable barrier. Teachers see that parents also have a hard time with educational jargon (3.53). The next two communication barriers relate to the mechanics of communicating: difficulty reaching each other (3.46) and teacher concerns about protocol such as use of email (3.3). A general insufficiency of communication is next (3.16), followed by parent's lack of confidence to approach the school (3.08).

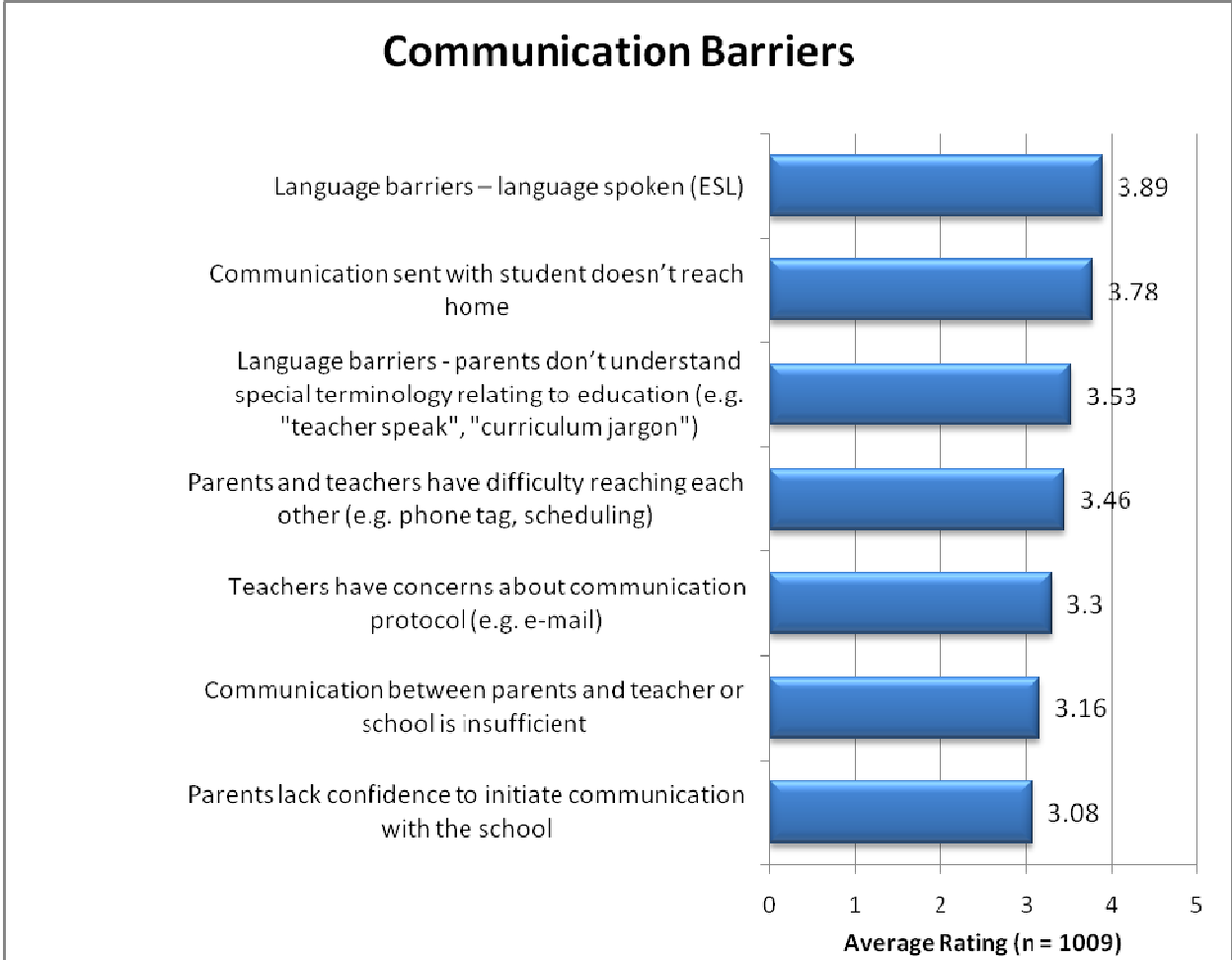


Figure 5: Communication Barriers

## Barriers to Volunteering

Teachers rated all types of barriers to volunteering (Figure 6) as fairly significant (2.59 to 3.48). Demanding processes to become volunteers, including police check, received the highest rating (3.48). Parents' lack of awareness of opportunities came next (3.30). Unclear recruitment process came next (3.12), followed by an actual lack of opportunities (2.59). These results fit well with views expressed in the focus group results.

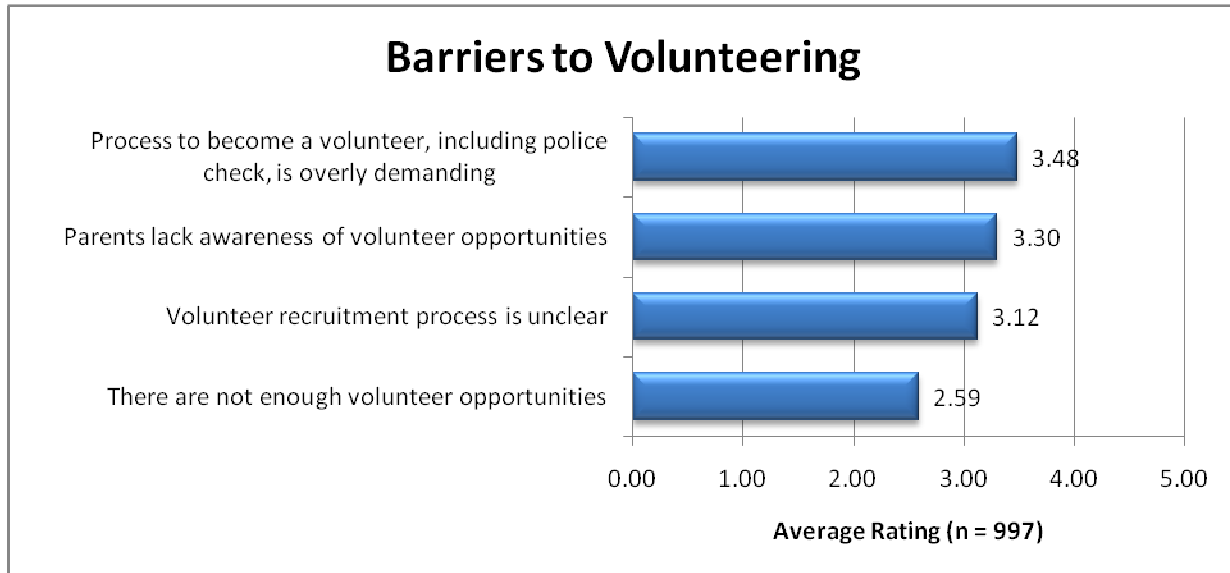


Figure 6: Barriers to Volunteering

## Support

Teachers were asked first about the support they had received in encouraging parent involvement and then about the types of support they would like to have. As respondents could select more than one category, the percentages shown in figures 7 and 8 do not add up to 100%.

### Support Received

The majority of teachers said they had received some kind of support (62%). The most common type was a school wide strategy (35%). A fair proportion (29%) had received written information on parent involvement. Formal teacher training and professional development workshops came in lower at 16% and 17% respectively.

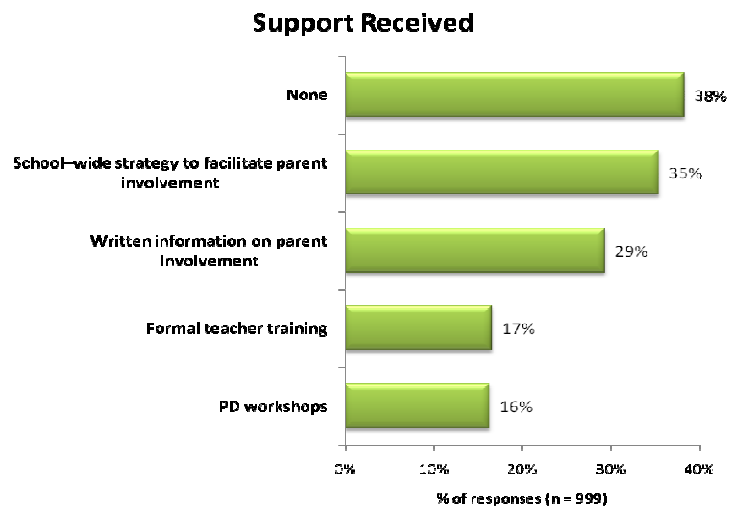


Figure 7: Support Received

## Support Desired

The most preferred type of support (Figure 8) was a school-wide strategy (52%); this result indicates that teachers appreciate the school-wide efforts described by principals in the focus groups. The next most popular type was written information (38%). A fair proportion (29%) would like professional development workshops and 17% would like formal teacher training. Interestingly, 18% said they would they did not want any support.

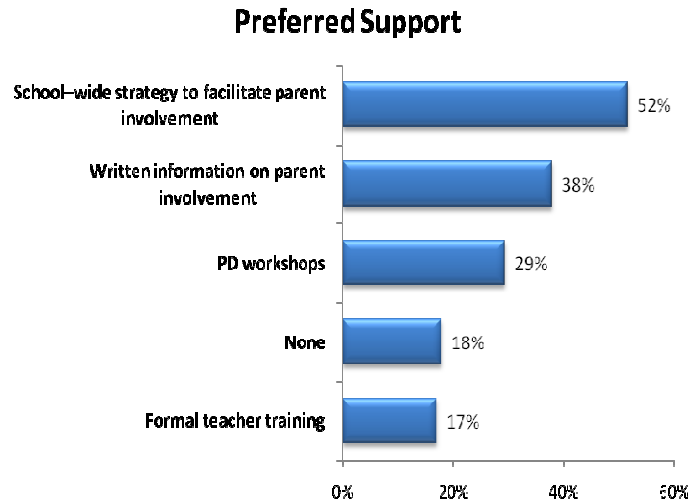


Figure 8: Preferred Support (n = 975)

## Best Personal Strategy

Teachers responded with open ended comments to the question, “What do you consider to be the single most successful strategy that you employ personally in encouraging parent involvement?”

### Best Personal Strategy

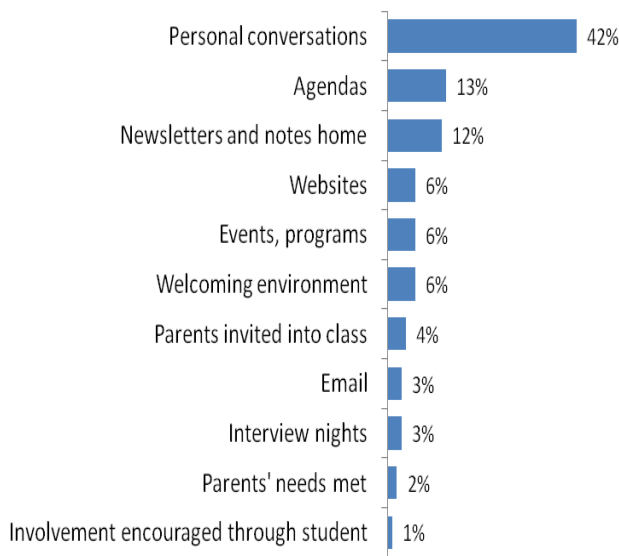


Figure 9: Best Personal Strategy

n = 705)

Responses to this question were coded into categories using NVivo and are reported on here. Note also that teachers often mentioned broader school-wide strategies in answer to this question, perhaps implying their personal involvement in those. Some teachers listed more than one strategy, in which case only the first mentioned strategy was coded to facilitate an analysis of ‘top of mind’ strategies. Unclear responses were not coded. Figure 9 shows best personal strategies in order of emphasis.

Each strategy is reported briefly here with illustrative quotes from the survey open comments.

## Personal Conversations

Engaging in personal conversations was by far the favourite strategy. Teachers often pick up the phone to contact parents with updates on their children's progress. Others use opportunities such as parent night or interviews to initiate personal conversations. Personal contact may be made on a regular or as-needed basis. In earlier grades, teachers speak with parents during drop-off and pick-up times.

*I contact my parents on a monthly basis to update them about their child's successes and areas for improvement. It is often times that parents only hear from the teacher when things are going badly; however, it is a great experience when the phone call is made simply to touch base and to keep the parents in the loop*

*Direct calls to discuss issues with students.*

*Personal contact with parents while they are at the school for another reason such as meet the teacher night*

*A personal relationship with parents as they drop off and pick up their children.*

## Agendas

Teachers in elementary and middle schools use agendas to regularly communicate with parents.

*Agenda notes re: positive & negative behaviour, upcoming events, upcoming quizzes*

*Effective use of the student agenda as a communication piece between the school and the home. This needs to be checked on a daily basis by both parents and teachers.*

## Newsletters and Notes Home

As we heard in the focus groups, teachers rely upon newsletters and notes home to communicate with parents. Newsletters may include details of upcoming events, notes home may require parents to signed tests or work that students have completed in class.

*As a Kindergarten Teacher, providing students/parents with monthly calendars/newsletters in print and online is the single most successful strategy that I use to provide information about day-to-day classroom programming.*

*I send expectations along with tips that parents can do each term at home. I send lots of notes home to encourage parents to get involved in their child's education.*

*After every test and major assignment has been marked, returned and taken up (corrected), students are required to take the test/assignment home and get a parent signature. This allows parents to see how their child is doing.*

## Websites

In the survey, many teachers reported using their personalized My Class website as their best personal strategy for sharing information.

*A class website to post assignment/project details and worksheets eliminates the breakdown in communication when children do not write project/assignment details into agenda or lose worksheets. Working parents like the flexibility to check the website when they have the time or when there is a homework issue in the evening.*

## Events and Programs

Parent evenings, open houses and performance events as well as ongoing programs such as 'reading at home' are popular with parents, principals and teachers as a way to get parents involved.

*We try to have several open house type events at the school during the year to encourage parents to visit, we have information sessions about topics such as EQAO, writing in agendas, phone calls, etc*

*Encouraging parents to become participants in the whole school Reading at Home Program.*

## Welcoming Environment

An open door policy and welcoming environment are fundamental to successful communication, according to many teachers.

*Provide a welcoming atmosphere in which parents feel comfortable approaching teaching staff.*

*Parental involvement can best be encouraged if they know a friendly face at the school. Communication with parents is the key.*

*Open door policy and a welcoming environment.*

## Parents Invited into the Class

Teachers spoke the importance of a welcoming environment, and many extend a personal invitation to parents to come into the classroom on a regular basis or for special events.

*Parents invited to visit class - gives them an idea how the classroom works, what the expectations are, how time is used*

*Having one day each month set aside for parent visits...making them feel welcome and comfortable in the classroom-no matter what language they speak or their background.*

*Invite parents into the school to assist with certain activities i.e. baking.*

## **Email**

As discussed in the focus groups, teachers use email as a current mode of communication. A number of survey respondents indicated their single best personal strategy was the use of email to communicate with parents.

*E-mail. Its concise. It gets to the person. It does not get caught up in phone tag. The kids cannot delete mgs from phone.*

*Email is a quick and effect way to communicate regarding homework, missing assignments etc. and all the conversations are documented and saved.*

*The few cases where students are in trouble and I have used e-mail ... guaranteed success!!! Parents with Blackberries are great ... instant action; assignments come rolling in.*

*Though many of my colleagues are uncomfortable with emailing parents, it is a very easy, convenient way to share information. Parents are grateful to be in the loop and the dividends are well worth the time spent.*

## **Interview Nights**

Interview nights provide a great opportunity for teachers to make the personal connection they highly value.

*The best strategy for encouraging parent involvement is having a designated time for interviews because it shows parents that interviews are important and relevant. Meeting face-to-face is crucial.*

*Discussing ways to support children at home during parent teacher interviews and providing some written support for parents during this time.*

## **Parents' needs met**

Flexibility in meeting parents' needs is the solution to getting parents involved according to some survey respondents.

*Giving parents the flexibility of when to come in. Ensuring parents have a meaningful task to do when they do volunteer.*

*I provide multiple opportunities for parents to participate at the level and frequency they are comfortable with.*

## **Involvement encouraged through students**

Sometimes teachers enlist the support of the students to get parents involved.

*I encourage the students to encourage their parents to attend family and parent events at our school. They are often quite persuasive!*

## Multiple Languages

A few of the survey respondents mentioned multiple languages as a best personal strategy.

*I make sure to break the fear of a lack of communication by starting the year and making a connection with a parent (in their language) E.g. have a translator translate letters for me, arrange a meeting with a translator, etc) and continue to do so throughout the year.*

## Best School Strategy

When asked, “What do you consider to be the single most successful strategy that is employed at the school level in encouraging parent involvement?” teachers mentioned a variety of approaches. Responses were coded using NVivo. Where teachers listed more than one tactic, only the first mentioned idea was coded to facilitate an analysis of ‘top of mind’ strategies. Figure 10 shows best school strategies in order of emphasis.

### Events, programs

Parents are encouraged into the school through organised events and programs. Teachers strongly considered special events to be the most successful strategy at the school level. Numerous quotations are provided here to illustrate the variety of events.

*When we organize special nights at school for parents e.g.; Literacy night etc, they bring a huge parents' turn out.*

*September Curriculum Nights are an excellent way to welcome (back) parents to the school community and to showcase the volunteer opportunities available within the school.*

*We had a multi-cultural pot-luck that invited families to come with a contribution. It was*

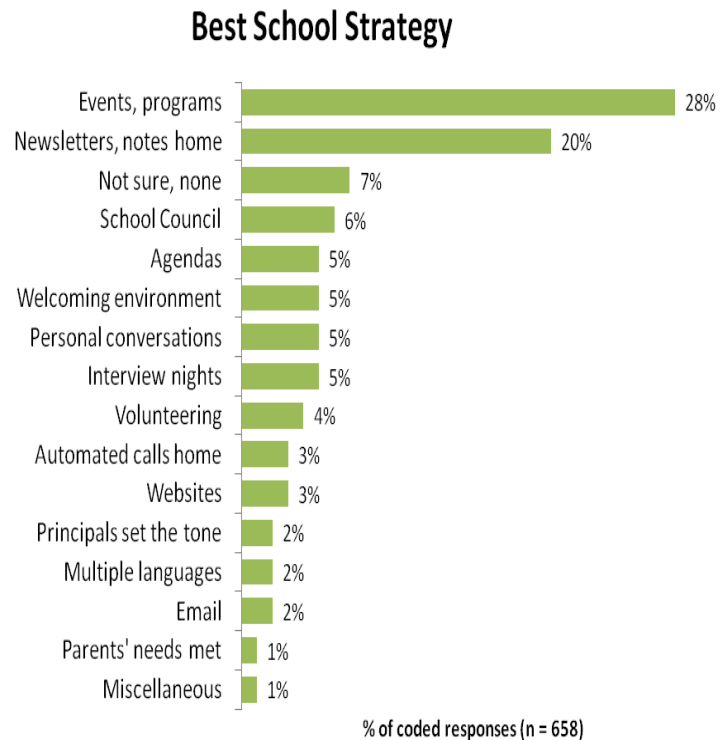


Figure 10: Best School Strategy

*successful in bringing parents into the school.*

*Community restaurant evening....Classrooms were foods around the world, parents bought tickets ate and socialized. Non threatening social gathering.*

*The school wide BBQ/international food night, as the "Meet the Creature" night has been extremely positive, well received by the community and an enjoyable way to meet the local community*

*We have "Walk up Wednesdays" once a month where parents come in and learn about HOW the teachers teach. We talk with the parents about such things as computer websites, math manipulatives, reading strategies, how to access the public library, etc.*

## **Newsletters**

Newsletters are another very important strategy at the school level, according to teachers.

*School newsletter helps parents know of school wide news and events and has helpful tips. Our monthly newsletter is the most successful strategy that we have.*

## **Unsure**

A surprising number of teachers were unsure about school level strategies, suggesting an area of growth for schools.

*I'm not too sure what the school strategies are.*

*I don't think the schools have a successful parental involvement strategy.*

*I am aware of no such strategies. We are left to our own ideas.*

## **School Council**

School council was mentioned by survey respondents as a way for parents to be involved in their children's education at the school level. However, school council participation varies widely among schools.

*We have a very strong Parent Council and Home and School organization which the administration works closely with to achieve goals.*

*Even though there is not enough involvement, the parent council is a critical piece.*

## **Agendas**

In some schools, agenda use is encouraged as a school wide communication strategy.

*Daily use of the agenda is a school wide initiative that we, as a staff, are encouraged to use to*

*encourage positive and regular teacher communication with parents.*

*Each child is required to use an agenda to record homework, school/classroom events as well to allow for parent-teacher correspondence which is brought home daily.*

### **Welcoming Environment**

An open door policy and welcoming school environment are important strategies at the school level.

*The single most successful strategy is having an open door.*

*A "welcoming environment" where parents feel they not only have the right to be involved in their child's education but they also "choose" to become part of their child's school and learning process.*

### **Encouraging Personal Conversations**

Some schools promote a strategy of personal calls home by teachers to support home-school communication.

*There is an emphasis on teacher-parent communication at our school via the telephone. We are encouraged to keep a log of our communications with parents.*

*Teachers are required to call home and send progress reports and keep the parents aware of what is going on*

### **Interview Nights**

Interview nights are considered the best school strategy by some teachers.

*Many parents come to parent-teacher interview night.*

*Parent Teacher Interviews encourage communication between the student and their parent.*

### **Volunteering**

Some schools actively organise their team of volunteers through a committee and formally thank volunteers for their contributions.

*A volunteer committee that acts as a liaison between parents and teachers. Teachers can request volunteers from the committee to come into their classroom.*

Volunteer Recognition ceremony

## **Automated Calls Home**

Where available, teachers feel positively about the use of automated phone calls home, referred to as Synervoice, to inform parents about school events and important dates. Some schools use automated calls to advise parents if children are absent during the schoolday.

*Synervoice has been successful in making more parents aware of events at the school and important dates like when reports are going home.*

*Attendance Call System is very successful form of communication with parents.*

## **Websites**

School websites are a useful tool for providing parents information about what's going on at their child's school. Online attendance information is available at some schools.

*The school website is kept up to date to inform parents of upcoming events and opportunities for volunteering.*

*Our school started pro-actively informing parents of truant children about the internet option [to check attendance], and helping them sign up for the service. This was substantially more effective than any punishment directed at students.*

## **Principal Sets the Tone**

The school principal plays an important role in setting a positive tone for parent involvement in school.

*Our principal is very approachable and easy to talk to. I think he makes all parents feel welcome and comfortable and encourages them to take interest in their children's education.*

## **Multiple Languages**

Yet again, teachers felt that multiple language communication was important at school level. Multiple language newsletters and translators at school events were mentioned in particular.

*Translated versions of letters in multi-languages is very beneficial.*

*Making translators available and visible at many whole school events.*

## **Email Distribution Lists**

A few teachers mentioned email distribution lists as a means for schools to communicate with parents.

*We use a school wide email list to send out news to parents.*

## **Parents' Needs Met**

At both the personal and school level, some teachers consider flexibility in meeting parents' needs an essential strategy.

*Find out what strategy works best for each parent (i.e. email, telephone calls, etc.) and use that strategy*

*A variety of opportunities to meet the time commitments available by parents.*

## **Miscellaneous**

At some schools the settlement worker plays an important role in involving parents.

*At our school we have the services of a Settlement worker. She has now been at the school for two years. I think that including her in our activities with parents helped them to see that they are valued and welcome at the school.*

Electronic signage at the school front entrance works well according to one teacher.

*Having an electronic sign out front that details report card dates, interview nights etc. prevents kids from withholding that information from their parents.*

## Conclusions

### Parenting, Assisting and Communicating

The findings of this study suggest that parents in Peel Region are most engaged in three of Epstein's (1995) six types of involvement: parenting, assisting student learning, and communication with the school. The parents in this study expressed a strong desire to be involved in their children's education and typically feel that they are indeed involved. The most common kind of involvement is daily follow up: asking children about their day at school, reading over agendas, ensuring homework is done, and generally monitoring their children's progress. Assisting with homework is very common.

Teachers think that parent involvement is crucial to student success. The types of involvement that they most value are the same types that parent said they typically achieve, that is support in the home and communication with the school. This result suggests a good match between what teachers expect and what parents can provide. At the same time, teachers say that some parents are not involved or are inappropriately involved. Some parents do not respond to teacher communication. Inappropriate involvement includes completing homework for the child, making excuses for the child, and not supporting the teacher when problems arise.

The theme of communication was the strongest theme in the study. Parents and principals both identified communication between home and school as a crucial aspect of parent involvement. Indeed, both aspire to a feeling of partnership between parents and educators. Typically the key point of contact is the teacher. Parents appreciate the various forms of communication such as written notes in the agenda, email and telephone exchanges with teachers, and meetings with various staff members including classroom teachers, administrators, guidance counsellors and settlement workers. Parents like personal interaction with school staff, and many would like more personal contact. Settlement workers play an important role in facilitating communication with newcomer parents. Grandparents are often primary caregivers and may be pivotal in communication efforts.

Teachers greatly value communication with parents, naming personal conversations as by far their best personal strategy to encourage parent involvement.

Principals make communication with parents a priority, especially in the lower grades, and they seek creative ways to achieve it. Generally parents appreciate the communication they receive, but some feel they do not receive enough information from the school. Looking to the teacher as the primary point of contact, parents find variability in teachers' efforts to communicate. Some principals have made a point of encouraging teachers' use of strategies regarding parent involvement. Both parents and principals recognize the limitations of sending information for parents via the students.

While making considerable effort at communicating with parents, teachers are sometimes disappointed with lack of response or a defensive response.

While parents usually feel well connected to the school in the early grades, this sense of connection decreases in later grades. Newcomers especially may find it difficult to initiate communication with the school. Parents find middle and secondary school teachers less accessible, and children discourage parent involvement as they grow into independent teenagers. Many parents find it difficult to engage their children in conversations about school. Principals recognize these barriers and are making efforts to help parents overcome them.

Teachers also feel that parent involvement decreases with older children. They would like to see it continue in higher grades and shift in nature to supporting greater self responsibility.

Principals said many families are experiencing other barriers to involvement such as more poverty, poorer nutrition, and more social problems. They are seeing more children with special needs than in the past. In particular, the incidence of autism has grown. They also see parents being busier than ever before.

Teachers feel that there is less parent involvement than in the past, largely as a result of parents being very busy. They want to see parents making their child's education a priority no matter how busy they are.

Parents in general said that the brief meetings with teachers on parent-teacher nights are not enough. In addition, these meetings typically do not meet newcomers' needs to learn how education works in Canada and how they can help their children.

Teachers highly value attendance at parent-teacher interviews while parents are often frustrated by these brief meetings.

### **Volunteering, School Decision-making/Advocacy, and Community Involvement**

Principals also seek to encourage the other three types of parent involvement: volunteering, school decision-making and advocacy, and involvement with the community. Evidence of their success was seen in the in the English language focus groups where many parents reported volunteering and some parents in the remaining activities. However, very few in the newcomer groups are involved in these three ways.

Fortunately, teachers are aware of parents' limitations in being able to spend time in the schools. They also recognize that older children discourage their parents' presence there. Teachers see the value of strategies specifically designed to encourage newcomers to feel comfortable in the schools.

### **Understanding**

A strong theme among immigrants was uncertainty about how to be involved. Over all, the parent focus group findings point to a fundamental difference between the educational approach in Ontario and in most countries of origin. Parents who have immigrated typically say they are accustomed to a traditional approach to learning that is more formal, more text-book based, and

more focused on memorization, whereas Ontario schools have moved to a less formal inquiry based approach that focuses on developing independent thinking skills.

Teachers recognize that many parents have difficulty understanding current teaching methods and lack awareness of the child's program of study. They recommend greater efforts to educate parents on these issues.

Principals acknowledge that cultural differences are important to address and are making efforts to bridge the gaps, but such a fundamental difference is not easy for parents to grasp. In particular, homework and textbooks are very important issues. Parents who have immigrated often expect much more homework, even in the early grades, and textbooks are typically the basis of the homework. It is very common for parents to help with homework but many find it difficult because they don't understand what is required and may not have enough proficiency in English.

Teachers value parents' help with homework but emphasize that parents must stop short of doing the homework themselves, a problem they encounter with some parents. Teachers see the role of textbooks as a specific area where parents need to be educated.

### **Feeling Welcome**

Principals try very hard to make parents feel welcome in the schools, and overwhelmingly parents said they do feel welcome. However, in spite of principals' efforts, some parents feel intimidated. Some parents retain a feeling of distrust from their own past experience in Canadian schools, and newcomers often lack the English language skills and confidence to become more involved. Parents are sensitive to the manner in which their phone calls and visits are received by whatever staff person they reach.

Parents and principals agree that positive events such as parent conferences, children's performances, and parent-child activities are very important to encouraging involvement. Events where their children accompany parents have been very successful and parents greatly value information sessions about issues directly affect their children.

Teachers recognise that some parents feel intimidated and some go out of their way to make parents feel more comfortable. They feel that administrators and other school staff also have a strong role in creating a welcoming atmosphere.

### **Teacher Support**

The majority of teachers said they had received some kind of support, the most common type being school wide strategies. This type of support was also the most preferred, indicating that teachers appreciate the school-wide efforts described by principals in the focus groups. The next most popular type was written information. A fair proportion would like professional development workshops and some would like formal teacher training. Interestingly, some said they would they did not want any support.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for PDSB Communications and Parent Involvement Committee

1. Parents' efforts at home to monitor and support their children's learning, despite multiple challenges, should be valued and recognized as the chief form of involvement that parents themselves value and are most able to achieve. Along with this recognition, information about the benefits and the broad spectrum of parent involvement (Epstein's six types) would help raise parents' awareness of what is possible and show acceptance of diverse ways of being involved.
2. Ongoing communication, particularly between parents and teachers, should remain a priority for schools. It is important for educators to acknowledge that parents feel less connected to the school as their children advance and to help parents understand how they can best remain involved.
3. Parents require help and resources on how to communicate with children who may be reticent about school.
4. To encourage involvement of all kinds, educators need to communicate their expectations clearly to parents. Newcomers especially need considerable encouragement and accommodation to help them overcome barriers including language issues, lack of confidence to initiate discussions, and confusion about what involvement is expected in Canada. Collaboration between the Board and community groups could facilitate communication with parents.
5. Parents, especially newcomers, need a very strong welcome from the schools at all points of contact. All staff, including office staff, teachers and principals, can affect how much parents feel their involvement is wanted.
6. A strong settlement worker program is important to newcomer parent involvement and should be maintained and perhaps expanded.
7. Parents need help to understand how teachers implement the curriculum with their teaching methods and learn complementary ways of helping with homework.
8. Educators should continue creatively planning events that help parents feel comfortable and welcome in the school. The numerous successful strategies listed in this report should be compiled and shared with all educators
9. School wide strategies to encourage parent involvement should continue and perhaps be expanded. Development of other types of support such as written information and training may be in order.
10. Teachers' efforts to set a positive tone through personal conversation should be continued and supported through a general policy of "positive first" personal communication.

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## Appendix A

### Parent Involvement Focus Group Guide Parents Moderator Notes

1. INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND HOST/NOTETAKER
2. EXPLAIN PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
3. EXPLAIN CONFIDENTIALITY
4. ALL FORMS READ and SIGNED?
5. NOTE THE RECORDING EQUIPMENT
6. EXPLAIN ABOUT NATURE OF FOCUS GROUPS: I am here to listen. We will give you information later, as much as we can. We want to hear lots from everyone. We will sometimes go around the table one at a time, but usually we want open discussion talking with each other. Be careful not to interrupt or start side conversations because the recorder picks everything up.
7. ASK: Any questions?

### Questions

#### ROUND THE TABLE

1. Please introduce yourself, describe your occupation, and tell us how many children you have and their grade levels.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS

2. Please describe the ways that you are involved in your children's education.
3. How would you define "involvement in your child's education?"
4. What gets in the way of being involved? Yourself? Other parents?
5. Do you feel the school welcomes your involvement? Please discuss reasons.
6. How can schools encourage involvement?

Final Thoughts?

Thank you very much for your time.

## **Appendix B**

### **Parent Involvement Focus Group Guide Principals Moderator Notes**

1. INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND HOST/NOTETAKER
2. EXPLAIN PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
3. EXPLAIN CONFIDENTIALITY
4. ALL FORMS READ and SIGNED?
5. NOTE THE RECORDING EQUIPMENT
6. EXPLAIN ABOUT NATURE OF FOCUS GROUPS: I am here to listen. We will give you information later, as much as we can. We want to hear lots from everyone. We will sometimes go around the table one at a time, but usually we want open discussion talking with each other. Be careful not to interrupt or start side conversations because the recorder picks everything up.
7. ASK: Any questions?

#### **ROUND THE TABLE**

1. Please introduce yourself, describe your school.

#### **OPEN QUESTIONS**

1. What is your definition of parent involvement?
2. What trends do you see with parent involvement?
3. What are the barriers?
4. What strategies have you used/do you recommend to encourage involvement?

Final Thoughts?

Thank you very much for your time.

## **Appendix C**

### **Parent Involvement Focus Group Guide Teachers Moderator Notes**

1. INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND HOST/NOTETAKER
2. EXPLAIN PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
3. EXPLAIN CONFIDENTIALITY
4. ALL FORMS READ and SIGNED?
5. NOTE THE RECORDING EQUIPMENT
6. EXPLAIN ABOUT NATURE OF FOCUS GROUPS: I am here to listen. We will give you information later, as much as we can. We want to hear lots from everyone. We will sometimes go around the table one at a time, but usually we want open discussion talking with

each other. Be careful not to interrupt or start side conversations because the recorder picks everything up.

7. ASK: Any questions?

#### ROUND THE TABLE

1. Please introduce yourself, describe your class(es) and school.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS

2. What is your definition of parent involvement, or in other words, what does an involved parent do?

3. In your view, how important is parent involvement?

4. What trends do you see with parent involvement?

5. Parents and principals both identified communication between home and school as a crucial aspect of parent involvement. How do you typically go about communicating with parents?

6. Parents described barriers as (most mentioned first):

- Busy life/Working
- Communication gaps/confusion about how to be involved
- Language barriers
- Lack of textbooks and curriculum information
- Involvement discouraged by older children
- Lack of subject knowledge
- Lack of confidence

7. From your perspective, what are the barriers to parent involvement, including those you experience yourself?

8. More broadly, what strategies do you recommend to encourage involvement?

9. Do you have any further comments on the parent focus group results?

Thank you very much for your time

## Appendix D

### Teacher Survey on Parent Involvement

#### Section: Intro

Dear Educator,

We are collecting information on behalf of the Peel District School Board's Parent Involvement Committee on parents' involvement in their children's education. We value your input on this important topic. This data will be added to data already collected from parents and principals. The educator survey takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete depending on your answers. The bar at the top of the page shows your progress. Your responses will be completely anonymous.

If you have any questions or comments about this survey please contact Carla Pereira at 905-890-1010, ext. 2626.

1) School/worksite location:

Mississauga  
Caledon  
Brampton

2) Number of years experience in Ontario schools:

0-5  
6-10  
11-15  
16-20  
more than 20

3) Are you a:

Teacher  
Administrator  
Other (please specify):

4) With which grade level do you work all or most of the time? If you are involved across two or more categories, please choose which grade category you would prefer to talk about in this survey.

K – 3  
4 – 5  
6 – 8  
9 – 12

#### Section: Ways parents are involved in their children's education

5) Listed below are various ways in which parents can be involved in their children's education. Please rate each item according to how important you think it is for parents to be involved in that activity. If you feel an activity does not apply at your grade level, choose the option "not applicable."

	Very	Somewhat	Somewhat	Not	Not
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	Important	Important	Unimportant	Important	Applicable
Participate in regular communication with the school (agenda notes, email contact, conversations with school staff members, etc.)					
Follow up daily on school activities with the child (asking child about school, ensuring homework is done, taking an active interest)					
Offer parental support and guidance in response to specific circumstances (e.g. dealing with social or academic concerns)					
Offer parental support and guidance in choosing high school options, making career choices, etc.					
Read with child on a regular basis					
Use the local library to access books for reading and homework help					
Help with homework					
Attend school events such as fairs, performances, meet-the-teacher, orientations					
Attend parent/teacher interviews					
Attend/participate in School Council meetings					
Volunteer in school (in the classroom, on field trips, fundraising, hot lunches, etc)					
Support child's activities outside of school (sports, dance, music, daytrips)					
Other (Please specify)					

### Section: Barriers

Parents and principals spoke about the following barriers to parental involvement. In your view, which of the following barriers present the greatest challenge to parent involvement? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not a significant barrier and 5 is very significant barrier.

#### 6) General Barriers



Which of the following barriers present the greatest challenge to parent involvement? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not a significant barrier and 5 is very significant barrier.

	1 Not significant	2	3	4	5 Very significant
Parents are too busy with work or other responsibilities					
Parents are unsure how to be involved					
Parents lack awareness regarding child's day-to-day program of study					
Parents lack awareness regarding current Canadian teaching strategies (e.g. inquiry-based learning, use of manipulatives)					
Parents lack subject knowledge to assist with homework					
Parents feel intimidated by the school					
Children discourage parent involvement					
Family transience hinders school-home relationships					
Transportation is an issue					
Other barriers (please specify)					

#### 7) Communication Barriers

Which of the following barriers present the greatest challenge to parent involvement?

	1 Not significant	2	3	4	5 Very significant
Communication between parents and teacher or school is insufficient					
Communication sent with student doesn't reach home					
Parents and teachers have difficulty reaching each other (e.g. phone tag, scheduling)					
Teachers have concerns about communication protocol (e.g. e-mail)					
Parents lack confidence to initiate communication with the school					
Language barriers – language spoken (ESL)					
Language barriers - parents don't understand special terminology relating to education (“teacher speak”, “curriculum jargon”)					
Other barriers (please specify)					



8) Barriers Particular to Volunteering

Which of the following barriers do you think present the greatest challenge to parents volunteering in your school?

	1 Not significant	2	3	4	5 Very significant
Process to become a volunteer, including police check, is overly demanding					
Volunteer recruitment process is unclear					
There are not enough volunteer opportunities					
Parents lack of awareness of volunteer opportunities					
Other barriers (please specify)					

**Section: Educator support**

9) What support, if any, have you received to assist you in involving parents in their children’s education?

- School-wide strategy to facilitate parent involvement
- PD workshops
- Formal teacher training
- Written information on parent involvement
- None
- Other (please specify)

10) What support would you like?

- School-wide strategy to facilitate parent involvement
- PD workshops
- Formal teacher training
- Written information on parent involvement
- None
- Other (Please specify)

**Section: How Can Schools Encourage Involvement?**

We’d like to gather ideas about how schools can encourage parent involvement. Please answer the following questions in the text boxes provided below.

11) What do you consider to be the single most successful strategy that you employ personally in encouraging parent involvement? Please describe only one strategy.



12) What do you consider to be the single most successful strategy that is employed at the school level in encouraging parent involvement? Please describe only one strategy.

**Section: Open Comments**

We're interested in hearing any other comments you have on the subject of parent involvement. You may wish to describe other strategies you have used or your personal experiences with parent involvement. You may choose to leave this field blank.

13) (Optional) Please use the space below to tell us any other thoughts you have about parents' involvement in their children's education.

*Thank you for participating!*