

## Engaging parents and other stakeholders to improve your school

[www.nasbm.co.uk](http://www.nasbm.co.uk)

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# Introduction

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Introduction from NASBM Commercial & Business Development Director, Bethan Cullen

The NASBM Professional Standards have defined marketing as one of the main professional disciplines within school business management. The necessity to undertake and understand the principles of marketing is continually increasing for schools; never more so than with the growth of academies and autonomous school structures.

With the growth of local market forces, schools are more reliant than ever on their local knowledge and understanding of the local community which they serve, as the competition for pupils and in turn their funding increases. One of the most critical factors in developing a school that is the local first-choice destination is the school ethos. As the starting point for learning is a positive ethos and climate of respect and trust based upon shared values across the school community, including parents, pupils and staff.

When reading this guide, it would be useful to reflect on the following questions:

- What is the perception of stakeholders of the school?
- When did we last engage and consult with our stakeholders?
- How do we demonstrate that we listen to, and liaise with, our stakeholders?
- Is our engagement with stakeholders always consistent?

This guide has been developed alongside PTA UK both to emphasise the importance of stakeholder engagement and to provide practical ideas for schools to take forward and develop. Support and guidance is also available via the NASBM Advice Centre which can be accessed online at [www.nasbm.co.uk](http://www.nasbm.co.uk) or by calling the team on **024 76 231221**.





## Introduction to PTA UK from Executive Director, Emma Williams

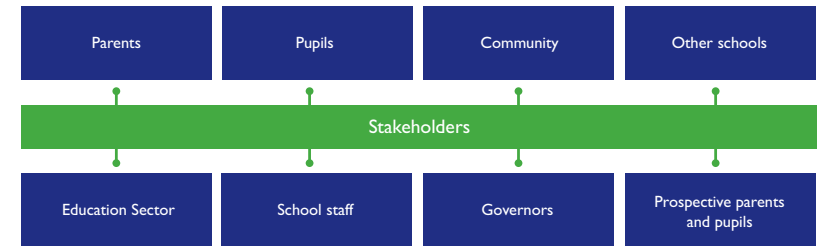
With some 14,000 members, PTA UK is the leading parent teacher association (PTA) membership organisation dedicated to developing and supporting PTAs and other parent groups across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We also champion parents participating positively in education and school life.

Clearly, strengthening the relationship between school business managers, parents and other stakeholders has great potential to improve our schools and I am delighted that PTA UK has been asked by NASBM to collaborate on this guidance to help you do this as effectively as possible.

PTA UK's members raise around £120 million each year (some £9,000 for each school on average). Although extremely valuable, this success in fundraising should not mask the role PTAs can play in involving the wider community that a school serves as well contributing directly to advancing education for the benefit of all.

[www.pta.org.uk](http://www.pta.org.uk)



“Effective programmes to engage families and community embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff and community members.” **Henderson and Mapp 2002**

Schools exist primarily to meet the educational needs of the communities they serve. In that vein, considering stakeholders - those who have a personal interest in the performance of a school and its pupils - has always been a priority for school staff. As schools face continual change, greater scrutiny and challenges on resources, it's more important than ever for school leadership teams and governors to engage effectively with parents and other stakeholders (both within a school and outside of it).

Another imperative for schools, in light of growing competition, is to continue to appeal to (prospective) pupils and parents and thus maintaining profile and a great reputation. Increasingly, the responsibility of stakeholder engagement and marketing is falling to school business managers.

So having a 'fan club' of passionate parents, past pupils, and community and business leaders can be a positive force for good in your school and help you sustain your mission when times are tough.

As a school business management professional, you have the opportunity to show leadership and help establish a culture of parental participation and stakeholder engagement throughout your school.

This guide aims to give you food for thought and some helpful tools to work in partnership with parents and schools.

Clearly, this area is best considered from a whole-school perspective where parent and stakeholder engagement is woven into the fabric of your school and is central to your ethos. One route to consider in achieving this is to join an existing accredited award scheme such as LPPA (Leading Parent Partnerships Award): <http://www.lppa.co.uk> or the Families First Award: <http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/family-friendly-schools>. Other providers can also support with staff training and frameworks for your school to follow.

## Parents - the principal stakeholder

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Parents matter. Research unequivocally tells us that parents have a significant influence on their child's achievement. John Hattie's seminal 2008 study found that "the effect of parental engagement over a student's school career is equivalent to adding two or three years to that student's education".

"Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising achievement in schools. When parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant".

**Do Parents Know They Matter Research University of Warwick 2007**

The term "parental engagement" often refers to what parents do at home to help their child succeed at school. It includes supporting children to attend and learn at school every day and ensuring they understand the importance their parents place on education.

Parents can also be positively involved in their child's school - such as attending consultation evenings, responding to surveys, volunteering their time and talents to the school including as an active part in the PTA, support with reading or becoming a governor. Being 'visible' in school also communicates to children the value parents their place on education.

Knowing how influential parents are may mean that schools choose to support the communities of parents who are unaware of the value they can add or are discouraged from playing their part because of their own, perhaps negative, experience of school.

Clearly, as a school business manager you can also ensure that your school maximises the opportunities to engage and involve as many parents as possible and in a constructive way. There is a whole array of ways in which schools can support parents: from becoming a community hub for parent training or other services, to encouraging a culture of parent volunteering and forging partnerships to achieve the school's mission and drive improvement.

PTA UK commissioned YouGov to poll 1000 English parents in May 2015 and found that an overwhelming 85% want to have a say on how their child is educated with 79% stating they wish to actively support their school. So the question is: how can you harness this resource?

## Ofsted inspections and parents

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"Parents are extremely important to Ofsted and we listen carefully to what they say to us, both during inspections and outside of this. We engage with parents regularly in many different ways to help us do our job better - and so to help us raise standards in education for everybody."

**Sean Harford, National Director (Education) Ofsted**

Giving parents a voice has also become an important part of the inspection and regulation of our schools, with Ofsted enabling parent views (see 3.) to inform its decision on whether to inspect a school. And so it follows that giving an opportunity for parents to have a say and acting on this feedback is a powerful driver for self-improvement in your school.

On outstanding leadership and management:

"Leaders and governors have a deep, accurate understanding of the school's effectiveness informed by the views of pupils, parents and staff"

"Schools will be assessed on how their engagement with parents helps them understand how children are doing in relation to the standards expected and what they need to do to improve"

Ofsted School Inspection Handbook June 2015

# How to engage stakeholders - your checklist

## How to engage stakeholders - your checklist

- ✓ Prepare a plan
- ✓ Work in partnership with PTAs and parent bodies
- ✓ Conduct meaningful parent surveys and take appropriate action
- ✓ Inform and consult parents effectively
- ✓ Market your school to the wider community and build its profile and reputation.

### 1. Preparing your parent and stakeholder engagement plan

As a school business leader, you can advocate that your school or schools prepare(s) a plan to communicate and work with parents and other stakeholders ahead of the beginning of the academic year.

Typically, this plan should cover:

- **Why?** What are the issues, changes or opportunities that parents and other stakeholders need to be told about or involved in?
- **Who?** Who are all the stakeholders you need to engage with to meet your goals? Are there particular parents that need to be involved or does the matter relate to all?
- **How?** What means are there to communicate with these parents and stakeholders, and which would be the most effective? How will you know if your engagement plan has been successful?
- **When?** What are the key times this needs to be done over the coming 12 months?

In terms of targeting parents and other stakeholders, you should consider:

- What do you already know about how your school is viewed by parents and other stakeholders?  
How are they likely to feel about the school engaging with them and the issues that need to be addressed?
- Do you need to gather further insight before you begin?
- Different types of individual parents and their communication needs, e.g. working parents, staff members who are also parents, language barriers
- Your Parent Teacher Association - active members and as a means of outreach to others
- Your Parent Councils or Forums - active members and as a means of outreach to others
- Whether a member of the school leadership team/governing body should lead on being the 'parent' champion to ensure better communications and partnership across all school matters. Could this be extended to other stakeholders, wider community engagement and marketing?

These annual plans could be made more powerful by defining how you would know if you have been successful, for example, achieving a healthy attendance at stakeholder events, meeting academic targets or over half of parents completing your survey.

Engagement with new parents on joining your school community, e.g. entering reception class and on transition from primary to secondary school, can be particularly effective. Guidance and resources can be shared with parents at this time to ensure their child is ready to learn and that they understand how they can support learning at home or otherwise get involved in school life. These are also excellent opportunities for school

business managers to raise their profile amongst parents, signal the importance they place on working with parents and set out their vision for the school.

Another powerful way of involving parents actively in their children's education is by holding events to explain aspects of the curriculum so parents understand what it is that their children are learning and how they can help them at home. These events also give the school leadership and governors an opportunity to address and meet parents. Undoubtedly, just taking such visible steps to reach out and involve others sends out a signal on your school's ethos and builds goodwill.

**Top tip:** Raise your profile with parents. Could you present at the new parents event or write them a letter of introduction?

## School improvement

There are many who champion the need for the senior leadership team, business managers and governors to work in partnership with parents as a key stakeholder in increasing attainment, wellbeing and ambition for our children.

One specific way that this can happen is to encourage parents to take part in the annual school improvement planning and budget round. Indeed, as well as demonstrating to Ofsted how your school is engaging and involving parents, many of the challenges we face can simply not be addressed without working in constructive partnership with parents.

Two years ago, **St Francis Catholic Primary School** in Maidstone was facing some real challenges including being put into special measures by Ofsted. Since then, parent Kylie Milne has taken on the role of chair of the Friends of St Francis and along with her new committee and band of volunteers has revitalised the association and boosted parental participation. The governing body was keen for the PTA to help build the school community. Governor Richard Ashton adds: "As well as providing welcome resources, the PTA is a powerful and supportive forum for parents and extended families within our school. I would like to continue to see stronger links being forged between the PTA and governing body." The hard work of parents, pupils, teachers and governors has paid off and the school has now been assessed as 'good' by inspectors.

This could be enabled by a meeting of staff, governors, the PTA and parents and other consultations where parents can make suggestions and have a say on what partnerships can be forged between home and school to help all. Of course, some ground rules should be set out to prevent the airing of individual grievances. Working with the PTA as it determines its plan for the year including fundraising activities may also be a helpful way of forging a joint mission and maximising resources to address certain issues.

Many schools may have found it difficult to get many parents to take part in these types of exercises in the past. PTAs can help by helping you contact a group of already engaged parents or by encouraging others to get involved. Some schools use their parent council as a consultation forum.



## 2. Working in partnership with PTAs and parent bodies

David Barnett, Head teacher at **Chudleigh Church of England Primary School, Devon:**

“Although traditionally known for their fundraising efforts, PTAs actually serve a far greater purpose. Many people don’t realise the important part PTAs play in developing stronger home-school links and in particular relationships with harder to reach parents.” David has been able to consult and get feedback from parents on, for example, a new behaviour reward system via the PTA which has not only generated fresh ideas but has also strengthened the crucial relationship between teachers and parents.

If one already exists, all parents automatically join the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) when their family comes into a school.

A PTA is an organisation that aims to advance the education of pupils in a school, in particular by:

- developing effective relationships between school leaders, teachers, parents and others
- engaging in activities or providing facilities or equipment which support the school and children's education.

75% of all UK schools have some form of PTA, parent body or friends' group. So it follows that working with your PTA can be an effective and efficient way to reach out and engage parents.

School business managers can work with PTAs to:

- help break down barriers to participation and build a school community
- help market and champion the school to the wider community, and prospective parents and pupils
- ensure that a wide and representative range of parents are involved in improving school life and attainment in a timely and effective way
- raise vital funds and secure other resources.

**Stanton Bridge Primary School, Coventry**

With the school on the verge of special measures, Head teacher Sofina Islam remembers being told at her first parent evening: “Mrs Islam, you need to know that we don't tell our friends that our children come to Stanton Bridge... it's known to be the worst school in Coventry.” Five years later and with the active involvement of parents, Stanton Bridge became one of the top 250 schools in the country. The parent body advocated the school to the wider community, were active in improving the school environment, canvassed parents and encouraged attendance at consultation evenings.

Some schools have a parent council (derived from an established PTA or as a standalone body) which also enables parents to meet, share ideas and feed back to the school.

Whatever the format, a parent body with its established communications with parents is a valuable forum for parents to have a voice within the school. And a key vehicle for school business managers.

Many schools seek to engage parents in reviewing strategic issues or opportunities for the school's future.

The school leadership team is required to prepare an annual school improvement plan and again may see value

in engaging parents on how best to achieve elements of this. Other examples include gathering feedback on a new homework policy or gauging whether parents feel the school treats children fairly or explains clearly how they can help their child learn.

In terms of strengthening the home-school bond, PTAs (as a constituted body of engaged volunteers) are ideally placed to be the parent body and could support you to reach out to parents via:

- PTA class representatives (i.e. parents assigned to each class in a school to involve as many parents as possible)
- PTA events, which clearly provide opportunities for parents to interact both with each other and with the school. PTA UK members typically provide an average of 13 events per year extending the school's reach beyond pupils and teachers to embrace parents, elected representatives, other charities and local businesses
- Promoting opportunities for feedback (e.g. questionnaires, social media or face to face)
- Linking PTA fundraising or other activities to school priorities
- Providing opportunities to bring the otherwise difficult to reach parents into school and feel part of the school communities
- Building relationships between teachers, staff, governors, parents and pupils via joint enterprises.

Although many PTAs and other equivalent bodies are initiated by parents, in many instances schools have taken a lead, especially when faced with particular challenges. PTA UK can support any school business manager, governor or staff member who wishes, alongside the head teacher, to support a PTA being established in their school or to improve the effectiveness of an existing body.

**Christchurch Spitalfields Primary School, London E1**

Nestled between curry houses in the famous Brick Lane, the school found itself in special measures five years ago. A significant proportion of parents spoke little English and engagement with parents had proved difficult. It was with this backdrop that the school and parents came together to form a Parent and Friends Association (PFA). As well as fundraising to improve the school environment, the PFA has set up a representative committee, established a communication channel, enhanced the school's standing in the local community and empowered parents to feed back and drive improvements.

**Top tip:** Why not join your PTA committee?



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### 3. Running meaningful parent surveys

What information your school currently holds and what else you may need to find out will emerge from your annual planning process such as:

1. Do we know how parents or other stakeholders feel about the school?
2. Do we know the opinions of all groups of parents or just some?
3. Do parents know what we expect of their children?
4. Do parents understand what and how their children are learning?
5. Do parents know how they can best support their children's education?
6. How do we support parents who don't know how to support their children's learning?
7. Are there specific elements of our school improvement plan that require parental engagement to be successful?

Running a formal, regular survey is one way of informing your plan and gauging attitudes. This could be done as a written or e-survey. One example is to ask parents to what degree they agree or disagree to a number of statements such as:

1. I am made to feel welcome when I come into school.
2. I find it easy to approach the school with questions or problems to do with my child.
3. I am part of the school community.
4. The school is effective at communicating; I get the information I need when I need it.
5. I understand what my child is learning and how they are being taught.
6. I know how to support my child's learning at home.
7. The school helps me to support my child's learning.
8. My relationship with the school could be improved.
9. I want to get involved in school life.
10. I want to have a say in how the school is run.
11. The school asks me for my opinion.
12. I have attended a PTA activity or event.

Clearly, getting a high response rate from parents to surveys is not always easy. As well as working with your parent bodies to encourage parents to have a say, you could choose to gather insight from parents via annual meetings or focus groups with a smaller number of representative parents.

### Ofsted and Parent View

Additionally, Ofsted offers Parent View - a website that encourages parents to contribute their views on a school's performance via a questionnaire asking about 12 important areas. Feedback can be used in the regulator's decision on whether to hold an inspection. However, uptake is relatively low so you could choose to raise awareness of Parent View as part of your wider plan to involve parents - to encourage as wide a selection of views as possible to be considered.

<https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/>

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### 4. Ensuring parents are informed and consulted effectively

Any school can move beyond surveys and seek opportunities to inform and consult parents on strategic issues or on how to support their child's learning. And, crucially, to gather feedback from parents on how this can be done more effectively.

This includes:

- Publishing a **newsletter** on strategic developments or under special circumstances to complement what the school already provides to parents
- Ensuring the school is using the school website, parent email, text message or social media to give **regular updates**, advertising ways parents can participate and encourage dialogue (including online)
- Raising your **profile and visibility** including welcoming children and parents at the school gates and playground, attending school productions and taking part in PTA/school fairs or events; this not only helps to show your 'visible' leadership, it will help you know your school even better
- Giving clear opportunities for parents to **meet** with the school leadership team and governors such as at parent-teacher consultation evenings, open evenings, welcome meetings for new parents or at an annual consultation meeting.

#### School communication goes digital

Engagement with stakeholders is crucial and ensuring that there is a coordinated and monitored approach is critical to its success. There are many options available for school communications from the use of SurveyMonkey to undertake parent surveys to having a dedicated school app that can help parents access the latest news and make parents evening bookings.

In the growing age of digital communication and with the demands of Ofsted to prove that pupils are developing knowledge of this technology and its application, it is key that schools start to adopt a multi-channel approach to their stakeholder engagement.

There are many companies that are set up to support schools with their communication platforms.

Approved Partners of NASBM who offer these services are:

- Schoolcomms
- Parentmail

Listening and taking action as a result of what you have heard from parents not only leads to better solutions but also reduces the number of complaints and degree of resistance down the line.

However, entirely school-led processes may turn parents off. Again, partnership with, for example, the PTA will help build trust and remove barriers to dialogue.

### 5. The stakeholders within - pupils and staff

Your school is most likely using a number of marketing techniques already in order to engage with stakeholders, to recruit pupils, and to market your school in order to ensure financial sustainability and therefore maintain high-quality learning opportunities for pupils.

There might be a number of areas, however, in which your school could improve its marketing techniques, especially in cascading and sharing the overall vision and goals with staff and pupils. Internal marketing is critical both to ensure a shared vision for the school and also to maintain a positive, supportive culture across the school. NASBM Professional Standards highlight the importance of communications and promotions and the need to undertake consultations with stakeholder groups, including pupils and parents, to establish their perception of the school. This can be achieved through a variety of methods including online surveys, school council and liaison with the PTA.

### 6. Public relations and marketing the school to the wider community

Building a positive public profile and stakeholder goodwill will help bolster the school overall but particularly if it finds itself attracting negative publicity. From the badge on a school blazer to the welcome speech by the head girl, there are substantial benefits from developing a brand that genuinely reflects the ethos of your school and is applied consistently on your website, prospectus and other communications. Another element of this, broadly adopted by school business managers across the sector, is to provide regular reports on performance and other school data.

According to the NASBM Professional Standards definition, marketing is about: “Ensuring the development of a marketing and communication strategy which promotes the school/trust and defines the brand, aims and goals [of the school].” It should also “develop [a] pupil recruitment [strategy], stakeholder engagement via appropriate communication channels and maximise income generation.”

So, what are the areas you might want to look at to improve the marketing strategy and areas within it?

- When engaging with stakeholders, for example, are you using the media channels most appropriate to your stakeholder audience, e.g. most parents use Twitter so creating a Twitter account?
- When developing events like the school fete, are you linking up with local businesses to procure services and, if you are, is it working well for you?
- Are you also advertising events in the local press, and what deals can you get for doing this? Are these branded as the school fete, or a community event taking place in the school? The community event approach might work better for you, for example, opening the mindset of the local community that it is a local event being held at a school in their area.

These are the kinds of questions schools will need to ask themselves increasingly, where school funding is stretched, pupil numbers are set to increase, and as a result competition in schools' surrounding areas will potentially grow.

Schools will increasingly be competing with one another, and understanding the needs of your stakeholders and their determining factors for selecting a school will assist in marketing your school to make it the local first-choice destination.

**Top tip:** Why not take a look at the marketing section of the NASBM Professional Standards? [Click here.](#)



Chief Operating Officer Stephen Jones and Business Development Officer Peter Trueman have been instrumental in establishing a culture of stakeholder engagement at this comprehensive school of over 1400 pupils.

**Stephen Jones:** “It's vital that Queen Elizabeth School is seen as a hub of the community and business landscape. Given the current political and financial climate, working differently is essential for our school's financial security and continued academic success”.

One inspiring element of this is the 'QE Family'. This is a group of teachers, parents, other friends of the school (and crucially students) which aims to support the school through business links, volunteering and raising money towards additional facilities and enrichment opportunities.

**Peter Trueman:** “We believe that partnerships between parents, educators and children enhance our pupils' success. We have seen how children learn more and have a better quality of school life when everyone in the school community makes a contribution and works in partnership.”

The School Leadership Team has provided opportunities for a number of organisations and businesses (including Dorset Police, Lorica Insurance Brokers and the British Heart Foundation) to hold activities in the school that inspire students and equip them with new skills and perspectives. Relationships with stakeholders and the school have been built through business breakfasts and an annual award presentation event.

<http://www.qe.dorset.sch.uk>





Justin Smith, Director of Marketing and Development, Wymondham College in Norfolk

Schools are able to reap significant benefits from adopting professional and coherent communication approaches with key stakeholders, particularly parents. Being able to clearly impart key messages to parents in a timely manner can prevent misunderstanding, rumours and general misinformation gaining traction, and of course we feel so much more comfortable leading the news agenda than being led by it.

It's important not to assume that our stakeholders' values are automatically aligned to our own - for example, do we really understand what our parents value the most about choosing a school for their child? Recent national surveys by Kirkland Rowell in 2013 indicated that teaching quality, discipline and happiness ranked the highest with parents. Prospect Magazine/Ipsos MORI polls in 2009 ranked discipline, good staff and communication the highest amongst respondents. Interestingly, "good academic results" scored just 49%-56% from parents.

Defining our key messages is all part of our marketing mix, and communicating those messages clearly and concisely to our audience is paramount. However, unless we are prepared to listen in the first place, how can we be sure we're really providing what they're looking for?

In our school we have a full media schedule, including a full marketing and fundraising strategy which incorporates a variety of initiatives. We have implemented a number of these which raise the profile of the school and generate income via funding grants and sponsorship. As well as conducting a brand mapping exercise with the aim of developing our core values, we have even introduced a college app. For open days, we have developed new materials and implemented feedback procedures, introduced a 'boarding taster event' to attract boarders, and secured both Sport England and Wolfson Foundation funding to refurbish two science laboratories. Other funding secured by the school means we run ICT beginners courses for the local community, thus increasing our engagement with community stakeholders. Our college music and drama productions are sponsored by local firms, thus offsetting the costs and involving local businesses in our events.

<http://www.wymondhamcollege.org>