HOW TO SET UP A PARENT FORUM

FACT SHEET
Fact sheet – How to set up a Parent Forum/Support Group

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PARENT FORUMS - A VOICE FOR PARENTS

1. Local Parent Forums

The School Standards and Framework Act require governing bodies to consult parents both about behaviour policy and the content of the home school agreement but the Act provides no structures whereby schools can democratically consult parents.

All schools have parent governors. Parent governors can nominate and vote for elected parent governor representatives on the LEA education committee. All of this, the Government claims, will lead to a stronger voice for parents in education. And so it might, but it might also lead to deep cynicism among parents if, for example, the ‘consultation’ means a letter home, the parent governors are invisible and the representative on the LEA has no way of reaching the parents in the schools s/he is aiming to represent.

In schools

Although the 1986 Education Act established the right of parents to elect parent governors onto the school governing body it did not establish a means whereby parents could communicate with their parent governors or vice versa.

Many parent governors find it difficult to communicate or consult with parents in the school. At times they might even be discouraged from doing so. Others find their views dismissed as “only speaking for themselves”. Many parents do not know who their parent governors are or how to reach them.

2. Why should I join or set up a parent Forum?

A Parents’ Forum would enable parent governors to discuss issues with a representative group of parents. Afroice wants to see Parents Forum encouraged and supported by head teachers and Local Education Authorities (LEA’s).

A Parent Forum would meet regularly to raise issues and to communicate with the parent governors. It could be used as a means of consulting parents democratically over all aspects of school policy where a parental viewpoint is needed.

3. What Should a Parent Forum aim to do?

All parents want to do the best for their children and at some point in every parent’s life there may be a time when advice, information and support may be welcome. The opportunity to meet and talk with other parents in a group situation can help to make the job of being a parent easier.

The intention of setting up Parents’ Forum is to provide a means whereby parental views can be discussed and made clear to the elected parent governors. Most parents have a useful contribution to make. They do not want power but to have their views taken seriously. However, the first step has to be for the head to decide that parents can be trusted and even encouraged to ask questions and to challenge, and that he or she can leave them to it.

Parent Forum’s should be set up to:
• Promote a healthy relationship between parents and their children
• Improve communication skills, i.e. with children and the school
• Support and inform parents on education issues and other issues which concern them
• Recognise that parents may need opportunities to talk about how they are feeling
• Enhance parents’ skills

There could be other benefits too. Many schools report difficulties in recruiting parent governors. Parents may be reluctant to come forward when they are unsure of their role. Parent Forum would be a means of encouraging parents to come forward, as it is easier to relate to your child’s class or tutor group. Encouraged by taking part in the Parents’ Forum it would be a smaller step to becoming a parent governor. Parent Forum meetings would allow parents to have a focus to discuss school issues together.

By "parents" we mean anyone in the role of caring for children. This includes mothers, fathers, stepparents, and lone parents, parents who don’t live with their children, grandparents, and other and family members and both adoptive and foster parents.

4. Costs

Setting up a Parent Forum will incur some costs and these need to be considered. Costs will vary depending upon individual circumstances. Materials, venue and time commitment all have to be taken into consideration.

Childcare, if offered, is another consideration. The cost of employing a suitable crèche worker or crèche volunteer may need to be considered.

5. Will we need to fund-raise for the school?

No. Parents’ Forum’s are intended to be a consultative body concerned with discussing issues of concern to parents and providing a means of regular communication and consultation with parent governors. Many schools have organisations already, for example a PTA or Friends of the School, to organise fund-raising and social events. Some schools set up joint working parties of parents, teachers and governors to do these jobs.

6. Where can we hold meetings?

Contact should be made with your child’s school to see if it will be possible to use the school for meetings.

If you are unable to use the school any venue selected needs to be accessible; preferably on a bus route and should bear in mind the access needs of people with a disability. Parents should be offered a welcoming environment, which offers some privacy to ensure confidentiality.

If childcare is offered, it should be near or adjoining the group venue to ensure parents
feel relaxed about the care of their children.

Wherever the venue is, it should be prepared carefully before the parents arrive. The room should be comfortably warm with chairs arranged appropriately.

Thought needs to be given to the timetabling of Parent Forum meetings so that they fit in with both school and family life. It is important that every session runs on the same day, at the same time and at the same place.

7. Facilitators

Parents need to feel valued and supported throughout the group. Facilitators need to provide participants with good role models, who have a non-judgmental attitude, listen, are supportive and nurturing and intervene when necessary – all the qualities that we wish to promote for positive parenting.

A facilitative and enabling style is recommended. This means listening to the views of parents, acknowledging their feelings and valuing the experiences they share.

8. Resources

There are a wide range of parenting programmes and other parenting resources available.

It is vital that facilitators choose materials, which they feel comfortable and confident with and that consideration is given to whom the group is for and what the aims and objectives of those parents are.

9. Recruitment

Flyers, posters and invitations are all methods of recruiting parents to become involved. These need to be brief, attractively presented with a name and phone number to obtain further information.

However, experience tells us that the most successful recruitment takes place through face-to-face contact and by word of mouth.

10. Welcome and introductions

Many parents attending the group will be anxious about being there. Facilitators should welcome parents individually as they arrive, introduce them to each other and offer refreshments. Stickers and felt tips to personalize a name label gives people something to do and provides a talking point. It is important to allow time during the first session to introduce and welcome everyone, both individually and as a group.

A good starting point may be to take feedback on what parents hope’s and fear’s about the course are and to list their expectations on a flip chart. This is also useful to refer to when you evaluate a Parent Forum meeting.
Give parents the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss any concerns. This will give you the opportunity to reassure them and to stress that:

- Remind them of all the skills they have already
- Parents should only share what they feel comfortable sharing
- Groups can be different

Different people have different needs and it is important to acknowledge the culture and context of the group. There may be needs and issues specific to individual groups and it is important that you negotiate with the group about how these are addressed. Particular group needs may have been identified prior to the course beginning. However, they may not become fully apparent until you start discussing hopes and fears and ground rules.

Individual needs should also be identified and heard. It is important to have realistic expectations of parents and to encourage them to progress at their own pace, offering guidance and encouragement when necessary.

There are lots of different styles of learning and different people learn in different ways. Some people learn through discussion, some through reading, some through role-play. Trying new ways and making mistakes are part of the process, but if people are worried about not getting it “right” they may give up. It is important to remind parents of all the successful things they already do and of all the skills they already have.

**11. Ground rules**

Ask the parents what would help them feel safe in the group. Write their ideas onto a flip chart and this will give the basis for many of the ground rules. Remember that this may be the first time they have been asked to do this and you may need to prompt and encourage. Some ideas to include are:

- Accepting differences
- No pressure to speak
- Listening
- Confidentiality
- Being able to add new ground rules at a later session

Remember that, for many parents, this will be the first time they have been in a group situation since leaving school.
12. Additional support

Parents may be dealing with all kinds of situations and may need additional support. Facilitators need to be sensitive about when to offer privacy and when to signpost parents to additional services. It is strongly advised that, when necessary, parents are referred to help lines, websites and other organisations offering support.

This will be the first time that many parents will have known that such support is available.

13. Evaluation

Allow time at the end of each session for parents to say what they did and didn’t find useful. You might ask them:

- What did you like about the meeting?
- What are you leaving behind?
- What are you taking with you?

14. Is a Parent Forum the only way parents could raise issues?

No. Naturally parents will continue to raise issues personally. The Annual Meeting with governors serves a different purpose. However parents should will find that being involved in Parents Forum will provide an opportunity to raise particular concerns or ideas, have them more widely discussed and to see if other parents share their views.

15. What you can do?

We now really need your support for the idea of the Afroice Parent and School Governor Network, so please join Afroice. If you are a parent, governor or head teacher please make a start now on setting up a parents’ forum/support group in your school.

Lobby for these ideas at school, local and national level. Make contacts locally with your school, LEA and MP.

We hope that you enjoy being involved with a local parent forum. If there your school does not have a parent forum, why not make contact with other parents and set up a parent forum for parents and carers.

If, having read this fact sheet, you start work on setting up forum/support group in your school please let us know how you get on. Keep in touch - write, phone, and fax or email with your ideas or to discuss these ideas further.

Good luck!
16. Where to get more information

Parent Governor Representatives: A brief guide (Code PGR - BG)

Guidance for Parent Governor Representatives (Code PGRL)
both free from the DfEE Publications Centre. Tel: 0845 60 222 60.

Giving Parents a Voice - Parental Involvement in Education Policy Making 1994
£5.75 including postage from RISE, 54 Broadwalk, London E18 2DW

A Voice for Parents. A guide for parents and parent governors on their participation in
schools, 1999, Joan Sallis. Home and School Council, £4.00 from NAPE National Office,
University of Leicester, Barrack Road, Northampton NN2 6AF

Afroice – The Greater London Parent and School Governor Network

Afroice is a London wide network specifically for parents, carers and families
of African and African Caribbean pupils. We aim to inform, support and
empower parents to be active and involved in their child’s education.

If you require more information about the Afroice - The Greater
London Parent and School Governor Network place please contact us:

Contact: Olivia Akueme
Tel: 020 8709 9779
Email: info@blacklondon.org.uk

Afroice
Black Londoners Forum
18a Victoria Park Square, London E2 9PB