

A parent is defined in the *School Act* as:

- the guardian of the person of the student or child
- the person legally entitled to custody of the student or child, or
- the person who usually has the care and control of the student or child.

# 1 parent involvement

*“Parents generally believe – a belief to which this Commission subscribes – that parent-teacher cooperation and mutual understanding between a child’s home and school, will result in a superior learning environment for that child. Moreover, parents rightfully feel they are entitled to full and accurate information about not only their own child’s progress, but also about the goals and policies of their school and school district – as well as to an advocacy role or voice when they so desire. There is a natural interest and a natural wish to be involved, not necessarily in active governance positions, but in advisory capacities to school authorities and school districts.”*

Barry Sullivan  
Royal Commission on Education  
*A Legacy for Learners: Summary of Findings, 1988*



Where the term “parent” is used, “family” can also be used, because many children are raised not just by a parent or parents, but also by aunts and uncles, grandparents, guardians and siblings.

Parents are their children’s first teachers and have the primary responsibility for their care and well-being.

They love their children and want to do what is best for them. Educators share parents’ desire to support students in their learning and help them succeed.

Parents and educators in BC are working together to support children’s learning in a variety of ways. They have experienced what more than 30 years<sup>1</sup> of research has shown—that when parents are involved in their children’s learning, their children are more likely to:

- perform better academically at school
- attend school regularly
- show improved behaviour and have better social skills
- adapt well to school
- graduate and go on to post-secondary education.

## What is Parent Involvement?

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Researcher Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships, Johns Hopkins University, has identified six areas<sup>2</sup> of parent involvement in education:

**Parenting:** Helping families gain parenting skills and an understanding of their children’s development; helping families create home settings that support learning; helping schools understand families

**Communicating:** Providing families with information about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications, (this includes newsletters, report cards, phone calls, conferences, emails, websites, etc.)

**Volunteering:** Involving families in school-based activities such as attending and helping at school events or helping in school and classroom activities

**Learning at home:** Involving families in learning activities with their children at home, including supervising and helping with homework

**Decision-making:** Involving families in school decision-making and governance, including school committees; helping individual parents advocate for their children

**Collaborating with the community:** Coordinating with other community agencies to support families, connecting families with support services outside the school.

## What is Meaningful Parent Involvement?

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Renihan and Renihan (1994)<sup>3</sup> say that meaningful parent involvement:

- is driven by educational motives and directed at the needs of the child
- assumes that home and school are interdependent
- assumes that parents need to be educated about the school and that teachers need to be educated about the home
- is viewed as an important vehicle for school improvement
- is based on sustained and free communication between school and home.



**The public school system has a “language” that is often confusing to parents. Educators and parent leaders can make the language more user-friendly and encourage parents to ask about things they don’t understand.**



### **Parent Involvement Strategies**

The William Cook Elementary School staff (SD 38 Richmond) developed a DVD to help parents provide a rich reading environment at home.

*Helping Your Child to Read* also includes translations in Cantonese, Mandarin and Tagalog.

With the input of an all-partner committee, Langley School District (SD 35) has developed a handbook to help parents, teachers, principals, support staff and others encourage parent involvement at all levels in the district. The 77-page handbook also includes a section on practices that teachers are using in their classrooms to include parents in supporting their children’s learning in literacy, numeracy and critical thinking.

[www.sd35.bc.ca/parents/parent\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.sd35.bc.ca/parents/parent_handbook.pdf)

## Challenges to Parent Involvement

In many schools, parents face challenges to supporting their children’s learning. In some schools, their challenges may not be obvious to others. Schools can find respectful ways to explore and respond to the needs of their parent community.

Parents may:

- be unaware of their right and responsibility to be involved
- not be getting the information they need to participate
- have problems finding child care or transportation
- have work schedules that conflict with school schedules
- not understand the roles of school staff and families
- feel unwelcome or intimidated at the school
- have had their own poor experiences with school
- be unable to help with their children’s learning at home
- have cultural differences
- not speak English
- live in poverty
- live in isolation
- be experiencing family breakdown.

Educators may:

- not be organized to meet parents’ abilities and availability
- lack training or experience in working with parents
- believe that parent involvement challenges professional autonomy
- believe that parents are unwilling or unable to help.

## Cultural Respect Team

At Bayside Middle School (SD 63 Saanich), the Cultural Respect Team is working on specific strategies to involve Aboriginal families in the school and improve success for Aboriginal students.

The team began in 2002 when former principal Marlene Dergousoff pulled together a small group of people to talk about how they could work together to address issues and provide support for First Nations children attending Bayside. They met regularly to discuss what was working, what wasn't working and what was needed. The answers determined that a bigger group was needed to share information, pool resources and expertise, and the Cultural Respect Team formed.

The team now includes representatives of all the district schools with First Nations students, Elders, members of the First Nations communities, the NIT'TUO First Nations Social Services Program, local community agencies, police and others. Meetings have included "showcases" by First Nations and non-First Nations students on the projects they were working on together.

Relationships developed as the team respectfully discussed issues related to the school, some of which also had an impact in the community. The broad representation on the team allowed for networks to build as the team moved into specific ideas on how they could work together to support student attendance, communication with parents and parent involvement, said principal Ray Rogers.

The team has acted on a number of strategies to support about 75 First Nations students. This year the bands' newsletters, delivered directly to homes, will include articles from the school. An orientation meeting with all Grade 6 teachers, counsellors and support workers is held at the cultural centre on Tsartlip Reserve. The meeting helps parents of children in Grade 5 support their children in the transition to middle school. A weekly homework club at Bayside uses First Nations students from Stelly's high school to help the younger children with their homework. When transportation was a problem, the local police offered the use of a van.

Bayside, enrolling 750 students, also welcomes the local First Nations culture into the school to benefit all students. The school celebrates Aboriginal Day in June. During school breaks, Elders share activities, such as knitting, reading with students and talking about the cultural aspects of their lives. They also provide support for the language of the Saanich people, Sencoten, a course taught at the school.



## Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements

School districts and Aboriginal communities are coming together to improve success for Aboriginal students in BC schools by developing Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EA). The EA is a working agreement between a school district, all local Aboriginal communities and the Ministry of Education.

These agreements include goals and strategies for increasing the academic achievement of Aboriginal students and stress the importance that traditional culture and language has in their development and success. School districts are also required to provide strong programs on the culture of local Aboriginal peoples.

## Encouraging Parent Involvement

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Schools are trying different ways to encourage parent involvement. Each school community is different, so what works in one school may not work in another. When schools talk to parents about what families need to support their children's learning, they can identify and consider ways to help parents with their involvement.

Some of the ways schools are encouraging parent involvement include:

- making sure the first contact with parents is positive
- using different ways to provide parents with information about their children's progress, school and classroom
- accommodating parents' work schedules
- providing transportation
- accommodating language and cultural differences
- designing ways to involve parents in their children's learning
- designing an organizational structure for parent involvement
- providing training to parents to help them get involved in different ways
- identifying and supporting learning environments beyond the schools
- connecting with community organizations
- connecting parents with schools before children reach school age.

Epstein's research has found that when schools reach out to families in many different ways, they are more likely to:

- involve more families, especially families of diverse backgrounds
- improve the academic achievement and behaviour of more students
- enjoy greater support from parents, staff members and the community.

## Diversity

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Students from many different backgrounds, with many different needs, attend public schools. All schools have the responsibility to teach and model understanding and respect for all persons.

Promoting a school culture that values diversity and responds to the needs of the school community is an evolving process. At times, people find it difficult to talk about issues of diversity. Creating a respectful environment



Surrey School District (SD 36) enrolls approximately 64,000 students. Approximately one in four students is from a household in which English is not the first language. More than 13,000 students, representing more than 92 different languages, received instruction in English as a Second Language in the 2005/2006 school year. As of September 30, 2005, there were 2,600 Aboriginal students. Over 5,000 students (8%) come from families on income assistance—this ranges from 0% to 54% at the school level. As of September 30, 2005, there were more than 2,200 funded and 4,200 unfunded special needs students in the district.

Source: Surrey School District  
2005-2006 Accountability Contract

that is sensitive to the practices and beliefs of others and where people can feel safe to talk about differences is part of the process.

The Anti-Racism Toolkit published by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) states that educators have responsibility as teachers, role models and authority figures to their students. “Classrooms where there are expectations and teacher behaviours that support a safe, respectful and positive learning environment go a long way in enhancing intergroup relations.”<sup>4</sup>

### Parent Capacity at Chartwell School

Chartwell Elementary School (SD 45 West Vancouver), a K-7 school, educates approximately 270 students from 37 nations each year. Ten per cent of the students are international students, and the school is also recognized for its success with students with special needs. Located in an affluent neighbourhood, the school faces a number of challenges, said former principal Christie Whitley. It has a high transient rate because families frequently move around the world. Attendance is an issue because children travel with their families. The percentage of single parents is high as often one parent is working in another part of the world.

The Parent Advisory Council (PAC), aware of families’ increasing isolation and the lack of sense of community in the neighbourhood, decided to make the school the centre of the community. They knew it was important for children to have a sense of community. They also knew it was important for parents new to the city and the country to understand and be part of their children’s learning. The PAC organized a Multi-Cultural Committee and hosted “*funraisers*,” such as Halloween and Valentine dances, a welcome barbecue and opportunities for parents to join in focus groups to learn about education in Canada. They recognized cultural holidays and staff worked with students to do “family grouping” activities every six weeks to honour different cultural holidays and traditions.

In the first year of the School Planning Council (SPC), the parent representatives asked to target greater integration of cultural groups on the playground. The SPC decided that its first goal would be “to honour diversity and defend human rights.” They chose this part of the Social Responsibility Performance Standard because of the level of cultural understanding within the school.

Staff and parents developed a comprehensive plan to work with students and parents. Over the next three years, the plan evolved. Staff developed a diversity conference supported by parents. All families in the school were involved in a major art project designed to honour play throughout the world. The project resulted in a beautiful



**Many parents extend their involvement from supporting their own child to supporting all children in the school. Through their PACs and DPACs, these parents can create a network of support for all parents and welcome them into the school community.**

marble mural by the front door of the school that shows the diversity of the “Chartwell family.”

The next community project included both the social responsibility and literacy goals. Each family worked with their children and provided family stories that represented the virtues of hope and courage. The stories raised awareness among students, staff and parents of the human values shared by the families regardless of race and culture.

“The Get Along Gang”, a group of mothers, met each week to learn about each other’s countries, traditions, foods and roles played by women. They also helped new English Language learners. These parents began to reach out individually to welcome new parents into the school. They introduced them to the academic and behavioural norms of the school and their new community. Loneliness was broken down, and the community shared a deeper understanding of Canadian educational philosophy. A sense of personal identity was restored to families separated from homeland and culture.

Whitley said the Chartwell PAC, SPC and staff gave students a sound foundation for success. They created a place where parents could meet and participate in community, where they could reach out confidently for help and assistance, where they were able to build on their skills to meet the needs of their family and where they could be learners and accepted for their contributions.

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## The Parent Advisory Council (PAC)

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Parents contribute to the life and energy in schools in many ways including their involvement in the Parent Advisory Council (PAC). Every parent can belong to and participate in the PAC. Every parent has a vote and a voice in the PAC.

The PAC’s constitution outlines its mandate to represent parents and focus on the best interests of all students in the school. PACs must make bylaws, in consultation with the principal, to govern their meetings and the business and conduct of their affairs. One of the bylaws includes how parents in the school elect a PAC executive to represent them. Parents have the right, through the PAC executive, to give advice to the staff, school and school board about any matter relating to the school that is not the responsibility of the School Planning Council (SPC). The PAC gives input to the SPC through the parents it elects to the SPC.

The PAC executive organizes ways for parents to meet to discuss school issues of interest and concern to parents and give input to the SPC. The principal may attend the meetings and offer information that helps parents