Findings from an Evaluation of Home School Agreements in England

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Abstract

This paper reports on aspects of an evaluation of the statutory introduction of Home School Agreements in England, using a survey of teachers and case studies of schools. After a brief discussion of the background to the introduction, the paper goes on to examine the introduction in schools of HSAs from the viewpoint of parents, pupils and teachers, the formulation of the agreement, monitoring and reviewing and the HSA in use at present in schools, alongside the impact of its introduction. The paper concludes that links with other home school policies and practices and clear involvement of parents and pupils are required if HSAs are to be introduced successfully. However, the lack of real engagement of many schools with the agreement leads the authors to recommend that the statutory nature of the HSA be reviewed, and replaced by a broader, consultative home school policy as a more useful tool.

Introduction

In this paper we report on the introduction of HSAs in England, using the case study and survey data principally, concluding with a number of recommendations and key issues. The full report on the project from this paper is drawn has been published by DfES (Coldwell et al, 2003). The study reports on a research project examining Home School Agreements in English schools, which took place between November 2002 and May 2003. In this paper, we attempt to answer the following research questions:

- How were Home School Agreements introduced by schools?
- How are Home School Agreements used in schools today?
- What are teachers', parents' and pupils' views of home–school agreements?
- What impact have Home School Agreements had?
- What changes could be made to the statutory guidance on home–school agreements in order to make their use in school more effective?

Background

Alongside the introduction of many parental rights (such as the right of parents to choose a school for their children, access their children's records and participate in school decision making) and parental engagement programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, an increased interest in researching parental-school relations emerged the 1980s. With this increased interest in parental rights and engagement came discussion of their responsibilities. It was in this context that studies such as Macbeth's work (1989) and the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) discussion paper ("Home-School Contract of Partnership" programme, 1990), emerged, for the first time bringing forward the concept of using contracts or agreements between schools and parents. In contrast with business and law, from which the notion of contracts was borrowed, where they are seen as successful and uncontroversial, the introduction of home-school contracts was greeted with a plethora of different views from teachers, educational researchers, parents and government.
On the one hand, advocates saw the home-school contract as a valuable tool because it promised to enhance home-school relations and aid student attainment. According to one LEA (reported in Bastiani, 1996:13), the contract can, for example, allow both partners to share a set of aims, remind parents and teachers of their commitments, provide guidance to parents and teachers to help them work together, and provide a starting point for exploration for partners when one of them fails to play their part.

On the other hand, some researchers (see reports in Bastiani, 1996) saw it as a "no-nonsense approach to sorting things out" (ibid:12) or as a government attempt to deprive parents of their "freedom... to do things on their own terms and in their own way." (ibid:13). The contract was seen by some as a statement combining expectations and demands without much consideration to whether parents agreed with these expectations.

The debate at this time focused on whether the contract could work with the differing power relationships of those involved. Once the contract was made legal under Section 110 and 111 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, the concept had changed somewhat from the notion of a legally enforceable contract to a more consensual agreement. Schools were made legally responsible to take reasonable measures to ensure that all parents and carers of pupils of compulsory school age sign what was now called the "Home School Agreement" (HSA) and associated parental declaration (DfEE, 1998a:2). Prior to its adoption, governing bodies were required to consult with all parents of pupils at the school, to try to reinforce the notion that it was an agreement rather than a contract. "Parents," the education minister Jacqui Smith explained at the launch of the initiative in 1999, "will be better aware of the importance of helping their child at school... In signing these agreements, parents will be acknowledging their partnership with the school to help educate their child."

School governing bodies were charged with introducing the agreement and for reviewing the agreement from time to time. Despite the importance attached to home-school agreements, breaches of its terms by parents and staff however were not to be actionable through the court, since the aim was to situate Home School Agreements as part of a strategy to improve partnership, rather than a punitive contract. This was emphasised by its launch alongside other measures to develop parental relationships with school and education including extra funding for study support and the introduction of guidelines on homework. The aim was for Home School Agreements to promote partnerships between schools and parents: with better home/school communication, parents and teachers, would be able to work together on issues of concern, parents would support and help their children more effectively, and issues of concern would be identified.

Soon after the introduction of the Home-School Agreement, a comprehensive study was undertaken by Ouston and Hood, (2000) to review the impact of the agreements on stakeholders. The study which focused on school's progress in implementing the Home-School Agreement and the school's attitudes towards the initiative found, following the analysis of a large questionnaire survey, and a small number of case studies, that there were no significant differences in attitudes towards home-school agreements between primary, secondary and special schools. Nevertheless, they did find that schools that did introduce the agreement before they were legally required to do so, tended to believe their teachers and governors were more enthusiastic than schools that were in the process of working on their agreement.
Methodology

A two-phase approach was used, with the following principal methods of data collection:

Phase One: Questionnaire survey of a sample of schools

Phase Two: Ten detailed case studies involving stakeholder interviews and group interviews of children in a sample of schools.

In addition to the analysis of these data, 270 examples of Home School Agreements were returned with questionnaires and a broad thematic analysis of these took place, although this data is only alluded to in this paper.

The questionnaire survey (phase one of the evaluation) had the broad aim of identifying the level of success of the introduction of Home School Agreements (HSAs). The content of the questionnaire was decided in consultation with members of the project steering group, and was piloted with a small number of teachers in local schools.

The questionnaire was sent to a sample of schools in 8 LEAs across England, selected to give a broad geographical spread, a mix of urban and rural localities and an appropriate mix in terms of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, with the aim of providing a sample broadly in line with the characteristics of the country as a whole. The research took place in December 2002 and January 2003. The sample includes four broadly urban authorities, three broadly rural authorities, and one London authority. Questionnaires were sent to all secondary, middle and special schools in each authority and a sample of primary schools. Secondary, middle and special schools were over sampled to allow comparisons to be made. Analysis was conducted separately for different school types, but this is only presented where significant differences were found. The details of questionnaires sent out and received are outlined in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Responses received by authority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority Code</th>
<th>Questionnaires sent out</th>
<th>Responses received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>82 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>37 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25 (49%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>32 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>47 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>71 (69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>361 (64%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 1.1, the response rate for each authority varied, with many authorities providing around two thirds response. However, Authorities D and E had a much lower response rate. This may be related to 'questionnaire fatigue': both of these authorities are frequently the target for evaluative research (in fact, one school actually sent back a questionnaire for a different survey by mistake). The overall response rate of 64% is reasonably high for a postal survey of this kind.
The case studies, involving semi-structured interviews with a number of participants and study of the available documentation and reports, were used to enable a more detailed examination of how Home School Agreements were implemented in schools. The predominantly qualitative methods of the cases studies were used to understand what the events and processes associated with the HSAs meant for the stakeholders, and to help contextualise other findings in the study.

The data gathered for the case study element included the schools' Home School Agreements, the questionnaire responses to the survey, other literature including Ofsted reports, school prospectuses, news bulletins, and, centrally, semi-structured interview data with stakeholders. Staff and parents were interviewed individually and in groups; and pupils were interviewed in focus groups and friendship groups.

Interview schedules were developed as the core for each case, but were slightly modified in each case, to take account of differences in questionnaire responses, and any specific issues that emerged from reading the documentation available on the school. The interview schedule explored the stakeholders' views on a range of issues (for details of this, see Coldwell et al, 2003).

48 of the survey schools indicated they would be willing to be contacted to take part in the Case Study research. Between 3 and 9 schools in each of the 8 authorities were willing to be contacted, and from these an initial selection process produced a list of 10 first choice schools across the 8 authorities, with first choices in each. 4 primary schools, 4 secondary schools, 1 special school and 1 middle school were selected. Many of these were engaged in good practice, according to Ofsted reports, with respect to home-school partnership work (although some were not) and there was a mix of schools in terms of their views on the impact of HSAs: most were neutral, with some positive or very positive. There were particular difficulties obtaining the hoped for sample of secondary schools, and eventually the sample was drawn from 7 of the 8 authorities, to enable the research to include three secondary schools.

Findings

In this first subsection, we examine some of the themes that emerged from the survey and case studies regarding the implementation of Home School Agreements.

The Introduction of the Home-School Agreement

Schools in September 1999 were made legally responsible for introducing the home school agreement. Despite this, we found from our 360 surveyed schools that 1 in 5 schools had not introduced the HSA by 2000. However, by 2002-2003, only 1% had not done so.

For some parents and staff, the drive for the introduction of the HSA at a later stage was simple: they felt compelled to meet the government's legal requirement. One headteacher reported: “I sent out parents with a letter explaining that I didn’t like it but that really we were only just abiding to the letter of the law; it wasn’t really what the Government was wanting from us and the number of replies that came back supporting what we were actually saying, ‘we think it’s ridiculous but we’ll sign it for you.’”

For others, the rationale was to retain their school’s good practice and reputation for excellence and for encouraging parental involvement. In one headteacher’s words:
“It’s the school’s commitment to involve parents and pupils in improving learning for everyone through positive dialogue.”

For others, the reason for the introduction of the HSA was to clarify the school’s, family, and pupils’ roles in learning. One teacher noted “(The Home-School Agreement is) a result of parents seeming constantly to be unclear about what the policies were in terms of attendance and lateness and communication and our expectations of them and their expectations of us.” Another headteacher felt the introduction of the Home-School Agreement would help the school clarify “grey areas” and help raise issues parents seemed unaware of: “It’s just made people understand what we are all about and what we were trying to do rather than sending letters out because they weren’t coming to school or that they had a low attendance, but that it was a partnership and we were trying to explain our role and what they could expect from us as well.”

Some pupils believed the Home-School Agreement would prove helpful to parents because it reminds them of their responsibilities, for example, for ensuring children are not late to school.

Finally for many headteachers, teachers, pupils, and parents, the introduction of the agreement was seen as a beneficial way to show staff parental support and respect. One parent felt “It’s nice to know that we’re all sort of pulling in the same direction, you know. I think that’s what it made me think really when I read it. I thought, ‘Well, you know, we’re signing this and we’re saying we agree with your policies and we know that we can come to you, you know, if we don’t agree sort of thing….’ I think it’s about respect, isn’t it. About respecting the school and the teachers that our children are under.”

The Formulation of the Home-School Agreement

When formulating the Home-School Agreement, we found that some 80 percent of the schools surveyed in our study made use of the DfES guidance, alongside examples from other schools. In our cases and analysis of the HSA documents, this was reflected in the majority of agreements having very similar wording based on DfES guidance, rather than individually tailored documents. One headteacher pointed out, “There was no thinking behind it; we just did what was the requirement from the LEA to be honest.”

Despite some clear indications by many parents and pupils involved in the case study element of our research that they would have liked to have had some input into the development of the agreement or perhaps in the redrafting of it, many headteachers did not consult all parents. Our survey revealed that schools tended to use meetings, parent governors as parental representatives and questionnaires (although this took place in less than half of all cases), which partly explains the low parental response to consultations (in 71% of schools, less than half of all parents took part in consultations).

Monitoring and Reviewing the Home-School Agreement

42% of schools taking part in the survey had monitoring and reviewing arrangements in place, with reviews the responsibility of school leadership groups in four out of five cases, and around 60% of the schools with arrangements in place intended to review the HSA every 2 to 4 years. In the case studies, several headteachers had already
reviewed the HSA, and in one case replaced it with a list of expectations in the form of a poster that described the rights and responsibilities of students.

Other headteachers claimed they have only recently began to review their Agreement in the hope of: (1) reducing the administrative burden upon staff by including a number of other policy documentation which requires parental signatures or some kind of acknowledgement, (2) including agreements for children that encourages them to take part in school activities and medical checks, and follow the school's internet usage policy, (3) reformulating the Agreement's content so it becomes more specific, (4) consulting more widely with parents, and (5) incorporating the Agreement with a number of other documents which require students, parents, and teachers' signature.

Some headteachers, when asked if they plan to evaluate the Home-School Agreement, reported their intention to think about amending some items on their document such as removing the section on pupils' responsibilities and requiring the pupils' signature. Finally, some headteachers noted that it was not feasible to review the document, because the Home-School Agreement is "difficult to measure".

The Home-School Agreement In Use

Since the introduction of the Home-School Agreement, we found that case study teachers rarely if ever referred to the document amongst themselves or in communications with their students and parents. Despite efforts by many schools to make the Home-School Agreement “look as good as possible” because, according to one headteacher, “it says something about you as an organisation,” many stakeholders felt the Home-School Agreement ought to be given a facelift or abandoned altogether. “The Home-School Agreement,” one teacher believed, “doesn't have the prominent role that it should have… perhaps the school should take it a bit more seriously at the end of the day.” In fact, some classroom teachers made a move towards developing more bespoke models of agreements, composing and using their own classroom contracts instead of relying on the Home-School Agreement.

The proportion of parents signing the HSA is high in most schools, and many of the schools that took part in our survey reported that they took steps to encourage reluctant parents to sign. However, schools reported a variety of reasons why parents may not sign some of which could be difficult to overcome (even if some of these reported reasons may in fact be views projected onto parents by teachers themselves).

Literacy problems and poor English played a part in some cases. Good examples of simplifying their written documents were found (particularly in primary schools). Very few schools translated their HSA into community languages. Ironically this was true of schools with extremely diverse linguistic populations because there were so many community languages that translation into all would be a huge burden and translation into selected languages would risk appearing exclusive. It would be incorrect therefore to conclude that absence of translation indicated that schools were not taking the issue of language seriously.

There was some suspicion on the part of some parents (in both survey and case studies) of anything perceived to be 'official', especially if it has to be signed. In some cases this was overcome by schools working hard to make clear to parents that the HSA was part of an overall approach to home-school involvement, and not a legally
binding contract. There was also the opinion voiced by some parents and school staff that because the HSA is not legally binding it is not taken seriously by some parents.

Some parents and staff saw not signing as a general lack of involvement with school and attributed it to parental apathy. However there were indications that there are many different reasons why some parents do not wish to play an active part in schooling leading to an antipathy to the agreement (see Coldwell et al, 2003, p16). In one headteacher’s words, “It’s difficult to know why they disagree and what they disagree about. That’s why I feel I need to get these groups together and talk about it... They wrote on it (letter from the school inviting parents to consent to the Home-School Agreement document) and they told the staff they weren’t signing it and some ripped them up. Some were quite strong - but, they wouldn’t say why. Some were just quite rude about it.” Describing parents’ suspicions of the document, a typical headteacher response was, “They (disapproving parents) were just derogatory about the whole thing- that it didn’t make any difference.” Parents believed: “it was the school’s responsibility to educate the children not theirs.”

Other parents criticised the Home-School Agreement document because they saw it as inappropriate for young children at the start of their school life because it expects children to commit themselves because they have simply signed their name on paper when “a child is a child,” and “child(ren) - at an early age - have no idea what you’re doing.” Like the parents, some students believed they should not be required to sign it because, in their opinion, “They’re young and then they don’t know what they’re signing for, and they’ll forget.” Relating to this, we found some of the pupils who have signed the Home-School Agreement in the start of their school were later unable to recollect seeing or/and signing the Home-School Agreement.

Some pupils found the document inappropriate and naive in its assumption that “if there’s someone who behaves badly, they’re just going to read that and sign and then change themselves just because of what they’ve read.” Hence, the pupils interviewed believed, students are likely to “just sign it for no reasons,” and “they might not even read it.”

Although some headteachers, teachers, and students believed the Home-School Agreement was beneficial in that it reminded parents of their responsibilities, some students felt the Home-School Agreement “put parents back in school again,” and “parents don’t need rules. They don’t need people to take control over them so they can do what they want.”

Some parents described the Home-School Agreement as appropriate in that it met their expectations of the school, their children, and themselves. However others felt their children’s school was not encouraging pupils to implement their Home-School Agreement’s responsibilities, for example with respect to “taking care of their surroundings.” Similarly, some parents criticised their children’s school for not implementing its Home-School Agreement’s responsibilities in “informing parents about what the teachers aim to teach the children each term,” and engaging parents in decision making in school. As a result of this, these parents believed, parents are ending up unable to “help at home” because parents believed they are given “no idea of what their children are doing in school.”

In addition to the above reservations, some teachers criticised the Home-School Agreement document because it was composed and revised by teachers at “a higher level” who had clear ideas about how it needed to be overhauled, thus making the document “not user friendly. It’s not in the language that they (pupils) would appreciate- it’s not in a format that would excite them.”
The Impact of the Agreement

In terms of the impact of Home School Agreements, the lack of engagement with the document outlined above was reflected in the finding that many of the staff within the case studies suggested that it was difficult to single out their specific impact from a wide range of other policies and initiatives particularly in relation to behaviour attendance and home working. A number of staff and parents did, however feel that it was useful to clarify expectations of the school, parents and pupils and also to formalise certain aspects of home school policies.

The main positive impact of the introduction of HSAs, as reported by the questionnaire sample, is in communicating the role, expectations and responsibilities of the school. In addition, one in three schools saw a positive impact in developing parent teacher working, and assisting parents in supporting their children's learning in the home, completing homework and encouraging good behaviour. In terms of other areas of schooling and education, the majority of schools thought the HSA had made no real impact. The vast majority of schools saw no negative impact on schooling, with the exception that some schools felt that it had created an additional administrative burden. Schools that asked pupils to sign tended to see a more positive impact from HSAs than others.

Many schools elaborated on their responses regarding the lack of impact of HSAs, noting that HSAs were unnecessary if there were already good parental relationships and that written communication was no substitute for face to face interaction. However, some saw it as providing an opportunity to formalise school expectations, and utilised HSAs as part of a much larger policy of home-school relationships. The key difference between schools was that whilst some had taken on the HSA as an integral part of their home school work, others had not. Without acceptance of this integration, the impact on schools is likely to be negligible.

Discussion and Suggestions for Practice

Three major areas emerge from the case study analyses in conjunction with the questionnaire analysis in relation to the implementation of the HSA policy in schools.

The Home School Agreement and other home school policies and practice

In some cases, the HSAs and other home school policies are conceived as separate things with the HSA being shorn off from other elements of home school relations. In some cases the home school partnership was seen to provide a genuine framework for home school policies, but it was more widely conceived as a useful tool as part of the wider raft of measures. In schools that see the HSA as being at least in some way part of the wider group of home school practices, it is more likely to be successful (a finding in common with the Ofsted Survey used in the Guidance for Schools and previous research by Ouston and Hood, 2001).

However, it is important to note that there is no simple causal link between this integration of the HSA with other policies, and the success of the HSA. In fact, the nature of the relationship between HSAs and other home school relations was linked to the school's conception of the HSA and its place in the school. In some cases, the notion of the HSA as contract was supported and seen to be helpful by some or all parties. In others, the HSA as contract was seen to be patronising to parents and anathema to the tone and ethos of the home school relationships in place.
The key factor here was the school's conception of its home school relationships and policy. These relationships and policies varied between schools according to factors including the age range of school; whether a school was a special school or a mainstream school; the expectations of parents; and the needs and expectations of the teachers. In some schools, the policies involved a partnership approach which a Home School Agreement was seen to threaten. In these cases, the HSA would not be integrated with other policies. In others, which took an approach based on a model of parental support or communication, the HSA was more likely to have some possibility of being fully integrated with other policies.

*Consultation, review and monitoring as an impetus to home school policy*

Clearly, HSAs were not seen to be successful by all stakeholders in our case studies. Even where some stakeholders saw the HSA to be an effective policy, this view was not always shared by all members of the school community. The evidence presented in this report supports the view that the HSA is likely to be successful if the implementation and continued use of the HSA is based on wide consultation.

Consultation and ownership by pupils was found to be linked to more successful use of HSAs (see above), and there was a thirst for this involvement on the part of the pupils interviewed. Consultation with parents and other stakeholders was seen as an integral part of the development of the school in several of our cases.

However, this consultation and consequent review of school issues was not always related to HSAs. Examples in our cases included the use of consultation on school ethos statements, and the consultation with parents before the introduction of the HSA that provided an initial impetus to improved home school relationships with the subsequent dropping of the HSA. Therefore, this research adds to the evidence that the wider use of consultation with parents and pupils in school policies - although not necessarily the HSA - is likely to lead to more successful home school policies.

*The Home School Agreement as statutory requirement*

The requirement of schools to implement HSAs in 1999 led to varied responses from schools. Some complied minimally, whilst keeping the HSA separate from wider home school policies and practices as described above, and this is linked in some cases to its statutory nature, in addition to a perceived conflict between the home school ethos of the school and the notion of a home school agreement. In particular, the requirement for parents to be asked to sign was reported to be problematic in some cases.

The requirement for schools to develop and implement the HSA within a specified time period meant that where schools felt a specific need for such a document, or if a similar document was already in place, it was welcomed as part of the wider home school relations. However, in other cases, where the agreement was not seen to fit with the home school policies already in place, compliance was minimal or HSAs ceased to be important shortly after their introduction. But in most of our cases, the HSA is not used on a day to basis according to stakeholders.

In several of our cases, and in other schools according to survey responses, HSAs are divorced from other home school partnerships, yet schools are required to use them. In these cases, they do not have a positive impact in the school. Therefore it may be timely for the statutory nature of the HSA be re-examined; and in particular the requirement for schools to ask parents to sign it. As an impetus to provide better
home school relationships, a shared policy - rather than a signed document - developed between school, parents and pupils, may well work better for many schools.

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References


