



Parentkind – Building Stronger Communities through Volunteering in Schools

Summary of activity

From August 2015 to June 2016, Parentkind NI (formerly PTA NI) worked with Northern Ireland government's Department for Communities to pilot a project called Building Stronger Communities through Volunteering in Schools, which saw parent volunteers take part in activities with new or existing Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in four schools located in Belfast and Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland.

The pilot aimed to encourage previously disengaged parents from disadvantaged communities to volunteer at their child(ren)'s school, with the intention of utilising the safe and familiar environment of a school as a method of introducing volunteering. The project tested a variety of ways in which volunteering could be harnessed to support children's education and learning environment.

Each school was assigned a development worker, who worked with school leaders to co-ordinate either the creation of a new PTA or the development of an existing one. Each school developed a set of priorities for the PTA to achieve and used a variety of outreach methods to encourage parents to volunteer.

Building blocks for success

The project report¹ describes the aim of the PTAs as supporting schools through:

*“Volunteering on projects suitable to each school;
Supporting children's learning on a day-to-day basis (such as volunteering in classrooms or at homework clubs);
Fundraising activities;
Developing wraparound care clubs;
Acting as a sounding board for the school and governors on policy;
Acting as a conduit between parents and schools;
Encouraging all parents to become more actively involved in their child's school and learning;
Providing hospitality at school events.”*

The pilot PTAs took a number of steps to encourage an interest in participation amongst a wide range of parents and ensured that activities and training for volunteers were relevant, beneficial and of a high quality.

A key feature of the approach was a close working relationship with school leaders. This helped to identify how volunteering could be most effectively harnessed in order to support children's education. Each PTA therefore started with an individual set of priorities, focused on what would be most beneficial for that particular school. For example, one school aimed

¹ Building stronger communities through volunteering in schools: project report 2016, PTA UK, <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/uploads/files/1/PTA%20NI%20DfC%20Building%20Stronger%20Communities%20Report%20FINAL%20Oct%202016.pdf>

to create a community garden from a piece of unused land. This involved a range of different activities, such as bidding for funding from the local authority and community organisations and organising training for parent volunteers.

The project sought to offer a wide range of opportunities to appeal to the mix of skills, abilities and interests of parents. Training courses were offered both as an incentive to take part, and to ensure that volunteering was as effective as possible. For one school in particular, training and volunteering were designed to be as flexible as possible, to ensure that parents could contribute however much time they had available.

The PTAs used a range of outreach methods to reach as wide a group of parents as possible and to encourage volunteering. Schools held information evenings for parents to discuss the project and volunteering opportunities. The pilot PTAs utilised social media to reach out to parents, and, with the support of school leaders, disseminated the information through local media. They reported that word of mouth was particularly effective for dissemination and recruitment.

Other steps taken included:

- Appointing a development worker to each school to help co-ordinate the development of the PTA, disseminate information about the project and to raise its profile locally
- Ensuring that social events were affordable to all parents
- Involving wider support networks and local stakeholders in PTAs
- Running Family learning sessions (e.g. internet safety) to increase engagement.

Impact

The project was independently evaluated by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI), who surveyed staff and parents and conducted a number of focus groups at the four schools.

The main impact of the project was in encouraging 91 parents to become volunteers across the four schools. All of these parents participated in training, which included both family learning and the development of skills useful in supporting their child(ren)'s education. Two-fifths of these individuals had not previously volunteered; at the end of the project, four-fifths had made a commitment to continue supporting their child's school after the project finished and all but three indicated that they would volunteer in future.

Parent volunteers were found to have gained the confidence and skills to be partners in their child(ren)'s education. As the project report describes, "the new PTA/volunteer groups made a substantial contribution to their child's school and supported learning" in a short space of time, with the project demonstrating "how parents' confidence and skills can be boosted within a supportive school environment". Schools benefited both from the specific priorities of each PTA, but also by the increased engagement of parents in the life of the school.

Each of the four pilots also experienced a range of other impacts. These included:



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- Commitments to further specific volunteering at the school
- Successful fund-raising and grant applications
- The organisation of social and parent recruitment events
- Practical support such as reading groups and after-school clubs

Contact details

To bring the project to your school, or to find out more details, contact editorial@parentkind.org.uk.