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LEADERSHIP BRIEFING · NOVEMBER 2026

Parental engagement: what leaders need to do

A practical summary of the DfE research report *Parental engagement and academic outcomes: evidence from longitudinal data* (Arnot & Brenton, 2026), for middle and senior leaders.

Not all engagement is equal. Proactive beats reactive.

The types of engagement most strongly linked to better attainment, attendance and later life outcomes are the ones schools can deliberately design for: clear communication, well-attended key moments, structured home study, a language-rich home and high expectations for every child.

Lots of contact is not the goal. Frequent parent–teacher contact and direct help with homework usually signal a child who is **already struggling**, so treat them as early warnings, not success measures.

ACTIONS WITH THE BIGGEST IMPACT

- Tell parents what their child should achieve, and how they're doing
- Get every family to parents' evenings
- Talk through options and subject choices with every family
- Build regular homework and a quiet place to work
- Get books, library visits and conversation into homes
- Raise post-16 expectations, academic *or* vocational

THE NUMBERS WORTH QUOTING TO STAFF AND GOgovernors

+6–7 A8 pts
where schools told parents their child's expected attainment *and* progress against it (and 35–49% lower odds of persistent absence)

+5–7 A8 pts
where parents attended parents' evenings, with up to 56% lower odds of persistent absence

+9–13 A8 pts
where parents expected continued education or training after Year 11 rather than work

+12 A8 pts
for 3–5 hours' homework a week in Year 9 compared with none; up to +18 in Year 10

+4 A8 pts
where parents discussed Year 10 subject choices, plus 57% higher odds of being in EET eight years on

+29 pp
on the phonics check for children in homes with 100+ books vs 0–10

ABOUT THE EVIDENCE

Three DfE longitudinal studies (LSYPE2, EOPS Primary and EOPS Secondary) linked to national pupil and earnings data: around 72,500, 7,100 and 6,000 pupils. Figures are adjusted for background factors but show **association, not cause**. A8 = Attainment 8; pp = percentage points. Produced by BDSIP; not an official DfE publication.

Six messages for leaders

What the research found, and what it means for your school.

+6–7
A8 points when expectations and progress are communicated

1. Make communication clear, not just frequent

Where schools told parents what their child should achieve and how they were progressing, pupils had higher attainment and 35–49% lower odds of persistent absence. More updates did not mean better: clear termly updates outperformed very frequent ones.

- → **Make every report answer three questions: what is expected, where is my child now, what can we do next?**
- → **Use plain English, avoid grades without context, and check accessibility for EAL families.**

–56%
odds of persistent absence where parents attend Year 11 parents' evenings

2. Get every family to the moments that matter

Parents' evening attendance was linked to 4.5–7 more A8 points, around £2,200 higher earnings and better odds of being in education, employment or training. Discussing Year 10 options added ~4 A8 points, and around 14 more for pupils with a statement of SEN.

- → **Track attendance by group and follow up every non-attender personally; remove barriers (online slots, flexible times, interpreters).**
- → **Make sure every SEND family has a proper options conversation.**

+12–18
A8 points for regular homework in Years 9–10 vs none

3. Treat homework as a whole-school system

Homework time was linked to attainment, attendance and £5–6k higher early-20s earnings. *Using* a quiet space mattered (+4–5 A8), not just having one. Direct parental help was linked to slightly lower attainment, likely a response to difficulty.

- → **Set a consistent homework policy and tell parents how to *check* rather than *teach*.**
- → **Provide supervised study space and build routines that get pupils using it.**

+21–23
phonics pp with regular back-and-forth conversation at home

4. Build language-rich homes from the earliest years

Books at home, library visits (even less than weekly: +12pp phonics, a third lower absence odds) and everyday conversation were among the strongest links. Reading aloud on its own showed little association: the talk around learning matters most.

- → **Get books into homes (lending, book swaps) and promote library membership.**
- → **Give parents simple conversation and reading prompts, not worksheets.**

+9–13
A8 points when parents expect continued learning post-16

5. Raise expectations for every pupil

The benefit held for apprenticeships and vocational routes too. Parents who thought university fairly likely had children with around half the odds of persistent absence.

- → **Bring parents into careers education early, presenting all post-16 routes as ambitious.**

3×
the odds of persistent absence with weekly parent–teacher contact

6. Treat reactive contact as a warning; design for equity

Weekly contact was linked to ~8 fewer A8 points, most likely because struggling pupils prompt contact. Disadvantaged and SEND families face real barriers (time, money, past experience of school).

- → **Use high-contact patterns to flag pupils for early support, and plan positive, proactive contact for SEND and disadvantaged families.**

Actions by role

Senior leaders set the conditions. Middle leaders make it happen in departments, year groups and phases.

Senior leaders

Headteachers, SLT, governors

Make it a strategic priority

Put parental engagement in the school improvement plan with a named lead, a link governor and clear success measures.

Redesign reporting

Audit reports and progress updates against the three questions: expected attainment, current progress, next steps. Pilot with parents before rollout.

Open up access

Offer online and in-person parents' evenings, flexible timings, interpreters and support for families with younger children.

Fund the conditions for home study

Homework club, library access and supervised quiet space, prioritised for disadvantaged pupils.

Measure the right things

Track attendance at key events, broken down by PP, SEND, EAL and ethnicity. Don't treat volume of contact as success.

Invest in staff

CPD on constructive, non-judgemental conversations with families, especially where trust is low.

Hold the line on equity

Check every engagement initiative for who it misses; target outreach to families facing barriers.

Middle leaders

HoDs, HoYs, phase leaders, SENCO, careers lead

HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SUBJECT LEADS

Purposeful, regular homework

Agree consistent expectations across the team; show parents what good looks like and how to check it's done.

HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SUBJECT LEADS

Clear progress messages

Make sure subject reports say what the target is, how the pupil is doing and one thing to work on.

HEADS OF YEAR / PASTORAL LEADS

Chase the key moments

Follow up parents' evening non-attenders; make sure every family discusses Year 9 options, especially for SEND pupils.

HEADS OF YEAR / PASTORAL LEADS

Spot the warning signs

Use frequent or escalating contact as a trigger for an early support conversation.

EYFS / PRIMARY PHASE / ENGLISH LEADS

Language at home

Book lending, library visits, reading for pleasure, and simple "talk about…" prompts for families.

SENCO

Proactive, not reactive

Plan positive, scheduled contact for SEND families, not only reviews and problems.

CAREERS LEAD

Aspiration for all routes

Involve parents in careers events from Year 7; give apprenticeships and technical routes equal status.

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- **School Improvement Partner programme:** challenge and support to build family engagement into your plan and evaluate impact
- Reviewing progress of pupil groups (PP, SEND, EAL) and intervention impact
- 1:1 coaching and leadership development for senior and middle leaders
- Curriculum, inclusion and governor services, plus CPD for all staff

Leadership checklist

Review with your team. Tick one box per line, then pick 3 "Not yet" items to act on this term.

	IN PLACE	DEVELOPING	NOT YET
Strategy and leadership			
Parental engagement is in the school improvement plan with a named lead and link governor	☐	☐	☐
We have clear success measures beyond "volume of contact"	☐	☐	☐
Staff have had CPD on constructive conversations with families	☐	☐	☐
Communication with parents			
Reports tell parents what their child is expected to achieve	☐	☐	☐
Reports show current progress against that expectation, and next steps	☐	☐	☐
Communications are jargon-free, accessible and available for EAL families	☐	☐	☐
We've asked parents whether our information is clear, and acted on it	☐	☐	☐
Key moments			
Parents' evening attendance is tracked by pupil group (PP, SEND, EAL, ethnicity)	☐	☐	☐
Every non-attending family is followed up personally	☐	☐	☐
Flexible formats are offered (online, varied times, interpreters)	☐	☐	☐
Every family, including SEND families, discusses options and subject choices	☐	☐	☐
Homework and home study			
A consistent homework policy is applied across departments	☐	☐	☐
Parents know how to check homework, not do it	☐	☐	☐
Supervised quiet study space is available, and used by those who need it most	☐	☐	☐
Reading and language			
Families can easily get books at home (lending, swaps, library membership)	☐	☐	☐
Parents get simple reading and conversation prompts	☐	☐	☐
Reading for enjoyment is promoted at every key stage	☐	☐	☐
Expectations and aspiration			
Parents are involved in careers education from Year 7	☐	☐	☐
Vocational and apprenticeship routes are presented as ambitious choices	☐	☐	☐
Equity and early warning			
Frequent or escalating contact triggers an early support conversation	☐	☐	☐
SEND families get planned, positive contact, not only reviews and problems	☐	☐	☐
We know which families face barriers (time, cost, past experience) and target support	☐	☐	☐