



Meeting the challenge of COVID-19

Learning and practice



How one school adapted its programme of support for parents, carers and pupils going from primary to secondary school.

What was the challenge faced?

The Parents in Partnership (PiP) programme, developed by CELCIS in 2015, aims to improve and enhance parent and carer engagement with high schools, to help increase children's attainment at school. In 2017, CELCIS worked with North Ayrshire Council to implement the programme in some of its schools, including Auchendarvie Academy.

Auchendarvie Academy has developed its programme and this is now built into the 'business as usual' support they offer to assist parents with the transition of pupils going from primary to secondary education (P7 to S1). Typically, the programme involves parents and carers coming into the school to visit the campus, to meet with teachers and get involved with various activities, including taking part in sample lessons to get a flavour of what S1 pupils experience at school.

In the spring, the closure of many school buildings under the first COVID-19 lockdown meant that parents and their children weren't able to come into school to take part in these transitions so Auchendarvie Academy needed to devise new ways to ensure that transition support could still be offered.

What change in practice took place?

The original PiP programme had only involved some families who had been identified from the school community. This year, with all parents and carers needing to stay away from schools under the COVID restrictions, it was thought that all parents and carers might benefit from this programme to help their children to adapt to the change in circumstances, so all parents and carers of P7 pupils and current S1 families were contacted and invited to take part. Instead of physical meet ups, support through online channels, including social media was provided. But for some parents and carers, access to and knowledge of IT was limited. Some didn't have access to home computers and were wary of using new technology.

So staff at Auchenharvie Academy asked parents and carers which online channels they would find the easiest and most convenient to use. They did this through surveys, group calls, phone calls to families and social media polls. Overwhelmingly, families preferred using Facebook as they were familiar with the platform and could access this through smartphones and computers.

Information videos about the transition from P7 to S1 and introductions to the team were recorded by the staff, as well as a virtual tour of school. School-related activities were set for families to do together, including TikTok challenges, sports and drama challenges, and an online rocket launch held by the Science Department. For P7 parents and carers, a virtual coffee and cake get together offered the opportunity to ask questions and 'meet' other families from the five associated primary schools.

Since returning to school, staff have continued to upload information videos on topics including music, drama, arts and PE, and on health and wellbeing; and regular online chats and catch ups with parents have continued.

Who was involved in making the change?

Once the lockdown restrictions came into force, Allison Hopton, the Music Teacher and Principal Teacher of Family Learning at Auchenharvie Academy, and Laura Booth, the Principal Teacher of Transitions, recognised that they were facing similar challenges in how to continue participation support for children and families so came together to work new ways to do this. They consulted families and other staff to ensure that what could be offered instead was informative, engaging and offered the support needed.

What difference did this change make?

After the first few online videos were released, parents and carers got in touch to report that they enjoyed not only interacting with the pre-recorded material, but having the freedom, convenience and flexibility to watch (and re-watch) this when they wanted, rather than having to be somewhere at a certain time. For parents in the original format of the programme, shift-working patterns and caring responsibilities sometimes meant that they couldn't attend some meetings.

Since establishing the Parents in Partnership programme in 2017, and following the shift to virtual contact during COVID-19, many parents and carers have also reflected that interacting on social media and through email can feel less intimidating than face-to-face meetings and phone. There had been a perception that school contact was only associated with negative reports around things like attainment and attendance, and parents had felt disengaged and demoralised. The support now offered through online channels, coupled with online videos, virtual events, and interaction with teachers, has helped to create more positive relationships between parents and the school.

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