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21st Century Schools Research Management Summary

Prepared for:

COI

On behalf of
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21ST CENTURY SCHOOLS MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

1 Background

In December 2008 the Department for Children Schools and Families published a consultation on its vision for 21st century schools '21st Century Schools: A World-Class Education for Every Child'. The vision is for schools to offer a genuinely personalised learning experience for all pupils, focusing both on improving standards and supporting pupils' development in the round, identifying problems and additional needs early and addressing them quickly and being a community resource that provides access to extended services and contributes to local cohesion and regeneration. Qualitative research was required to support the development of the 21st century schools White Paper by ensuring that the future direction of schools policy considered the opinions of parents and young people.

2 Methodology

The methodology was qualitative and included 16 paired depth interviews with children in school years 7-11 (3-4 paired depths per school year group), 10 group discussions with parents of primary and secondary school children, and 4 paired or depth interviews with parents of children with special needs. The parents sample included mothers, fathers and carers. The research was conducted in March and April 2009 and included a range of locations across England. A spread of regions and urban, metropolitan and rural locations were included.

3 Summary of Issues

A wide range of settings and situations were covered within this research, in order to provide as full a picture of the views and experiences of different pupils and parents. While the contexts varied (newer/ older schools, larger/smaller schools, higher/lower performing schools and a range of pupil ability and performance) certain common factors appeared to impact on parental and pupil attitudes to their school and their satisfaction with it. The key factors emerging were the level of parental engagement in education (in terms of feedback from school), a perception of the opportunity to get on in class without disruption, the sense that help was (or should be) available when required, and a more general perception that their children's school was perceived as performing well in terms of both Ofsted inspections and overall desirability which included meeting a child's own needs.

There was often warmth amongst parents and children towards their schools, and broad respect for teachers for the job they do, although there were negatives raised about certain teaching styles and standards. There was also a general openness to schools having a wide remit in terms of education, which included the social and emotional development of children.

For parents, the core spontaneous issues raised overall were school standards, teaching standards, and in areas where admissions had been an issue, getting children in to the right school. For young people, the quality of teaching, the in-lesson experience, and the facilities were often raised. In both audiences equality of allocation of resource was raised as an issue: there was a concern that the most disruptive got disproportionate attention and both the more able and the average pupil might receive less attention as a result.

Responses to the planks of the 21st century schools agenda were positive across both audiences although available resources were sometimes raised as an issue. In some situations both parents and pupils felt that much of what is proposed is already being put in place. The focus on meeting individual needs and personalised learning was seen as a strong initiative so long as it is deliverable. Pupil involvement in schools was welcomed for encouraging 'ownership' within schools, although it was not necessarily seen as central to improving education. Broadening access and working with the community was generally seen as a good idea, although it raised issues such as security concerns and fit with education. A clear rationale would be needed for additional services offered alongside reassurances about how these would be managed so as not to disadvantage pupils. Involving parents both in terms of feedback and participation was seen as a positive provided real resources were supplied, although it felt easier for parents to be involved at primary than secondary levels.

4 Specific issues

4.1 What makes a good school from a parent and pupil's perspective?

Parents and children saw results (e.g. exam results, OFSTED ratings) as *part* of what makes up a good school, but not the only factor. One's own child's performance and happiness at school were also important.

"Ofsted? Not to me personally, as long as you are happy and you learn what you want to learn" Year 10 boys

"How do you measure how good your school is? Ofsted reports, SATs...my daughter's school was quite recently Ofsted inspected and the children were all primed for it...yes a bit of a waste of time isn't it... I think the reports are important for parents... I'd like to send my child to a good school and not to any school where the child is not likely to achieve" Primary parents

"A lot depends on the child as well, my youngest daughter, when she was in primary school I moved her from her school, I didn't have any major issues with the school itself it just didn't suit my daughter" Primary parents

"It is about what is right for the child – I have managed to get mine in different schools, and luckily they are both thriving. It is not as simple as a league table" Secondary parents

"They are going to be happy really... children who are well behaved and respectful... teachers that enjoy what they are doing" Primary parents

"My lad seems pretty happy, I would say he's middle of the road and doesn't swot all the time, he's doing all right and I think that's the main thing and as long as they are happy" Secondary parents

Class sizes and facilities were raised as indicators, as were the child/teacher relationship and effective, interesting teaching styles. Good communication, good discipline and behavior were also raised.

“...have good learning resources, good technology and good subjects” Year 8 boys

“I think if my children are happy. If they are happy they will learn” Primary parents

“Our school is good at making things interactive and not just out of a book” Year 8 boys

“If you’ve got any problems they’ll help you out” Year 7 girls

“They try and make some of the lessons quite fun and we go on the computers a lot... there’s quite a few choices of after school activities to go to” Year 7 girls

“It’s very clean” Year 7 girls

“It depends on the teachers... there will be certain teachers who will pick favourites... there are some teachers who give you a really good chance, they don’t judge you... some people learn out of listening and then there’s like me, I learn by actually doing something” Year 10 boys

“I think as long as there are good facilities, breakfast club and after school club, because I struggle with that and it really grips me when they have these inset days” Primary parents

“Feedback – keeping in touch, my son had been struggling, now they send a text if he is even late – it has made a real difference” Secondary parents

Parents and children felt that schools were quite good at informing them about results and particularly positive results, and local media also played a part in spreading news about results, although there was some interest in knowing more about the future plans of a school and its aims and targets.

“I think it should stop telling us about ‘how you have been’ and more about how it needs to be or what’s going to happen” Year 8 boys

“If I wanted to know, I could find out through Ofsted... we get a sheet at the end of the year about how we did” Year 8 boys

5 Overall response to 21st Century School Theme

The following themes were discussed with parents and children summarising the 4 key elements of 21st century schools:

- Meets the needs of each child or young person better
- Involves and asks pupils their views, not just on their own learning and additional needs, but also on issues related to the school as a whole
- Can be used by the whole community, building on existing clubs and activities
- Involves parents and carers in their child’s learning and development

Each theme was discussed spontaneously to understand current attitudes and expectations, and then respondents were prompted with pre-generated statements designed to stimulate focused discussion.

5.1 Meeting the needs of each child or young person better

Schools were seen as having a broader remit than just education needs and therefore 'needs' was understood as including health, emotional and social development.

"They offer quite a nice environment, friendly and open and they feel they can talk to the teachers on the whole. They are happy to go" Primary parents

"The child has to be happy, the child spends an awful lot of hours at school... it's not just about learning... Sometimes it is family life as well... if there are things they want to talk about they should feel able to" Primary parents

Spontaneously parents and children were often positive about schools broadly meeting the needs of children with any negatives tending to surround negative in-class experiences.

"The lessons are quite fun... quite a fun choice of after-school activities" Year 7 girls

"When lessons are more fun and interactive and you are working in groups you find it a lot easier to learn" Year 10 boys

"The teachers are too busy. If you don't understand something and ask, you get ignored. Then when you can't do the work, you get yelled at for not doing it. It makes you think, why bother" Year 8 boys

However, meeting the *individual* needs of children was seen as an ideal which parents felt would be extremely hard to meet due to pressures on teachers, time and financial resources. Some examples of initiatives already in place were given - for example, personal tutors, personal goal setting, additional lessons, letters home and taking into account different learning preferences and styles in class.

"They are not grouped together like a herd of cattle, they are an individual" Secondary parents

"As an individual, each child, which is a very hard task to do" Primary parents

5.1.1 Specific aspects of meeting needs

Meets the needs of each child or young person better

Personalised learning was a new concept to most and it was seen as an ideal, although many were concerned about how this could be realistically delivered given class sizes and resources.

"I think high achievers are targeted and low achievers are, but there's no middle ground" Primary parents

*“Good in theory. You only need one child to disrupt the whole class and it doesn’t always work. They can’t just remove that child always it’s a fine line”
Secondary parents*

*“It’s all very good but whether they could do it for each individual child that’s another thing. They are teaching classes...Often they are quite big classes as well”
Secondary parents*

*“Sounds great if it’s done”
Primary parents*

*“Yeah, that would be great, it would mean everyone could work at the right pace for them”
Year 7 girls*

*“It would be hard, you can have one basic teacher and for a teacher to get round and teach 31 kids in 50 minutes it’s almost impossible.”
Year 10 boys*

*“They shouldn’t be made to feel at age 7 that there’s a better and worse group”
Primary parents*

5.1.2 Teaching is aimed at the needs of each child so everyone is stretched to do their best

The idea of ‘stretching’ was, on balance, a positive for most parents, with most seeing this as suggesting that pupils will be helped and encouraged to achieve the most they can.

*“I think it is good to push kids – they need a push”
Primary parents*

*“So long as the child’s interest comes first, it is not just for the teachers to get a raise”
Primary parents*

*“Half the time we feel we are held back, it would be nice to move faster”
Year 8 girls*

*“What about the ones who don’t want to learn – that is the problem”
Year 9 boys*

Some parents were however concerned that it could suggest an undue focus on exam results and putting pressure on children.

*“We all know that they can be lazy, and stretching suggests getting them working hard, but within reason – not discouraging them”
Secondary parents*

*“It’s all part of the focus on exam results now, that is all they seem to care about”
Secondary parents*

5.1.3 Each child has a person – a personal tutor who knows him or her well, monitors progress and responds quickly if any problems emerge.

The idea of a personal tutor for all was welcomed, particularly at secondary level though again with some concerns about delivery. Overall the idea tended to receive the most

positive response from parents rather than children, who were at times less enthusiastic about the idea. This concept helped communicate that all children are important, not just the most disruptive or the brightest, and the benefits included individual monitoring of a child's progress, providing a named contact for parents at the school, and the possibility of providing emotional support for children. This particular aspect of the role was debated, as some children did not necessarily want emotional support provided by the same person who delivers academic support, and may prefer to choose someone else who they have bonded with or who provides this professionally.

"They are quite good because you can always turn to them and they will support you" Year 10 boys

"Sometimes it's hard to talk to your parents – they do this at our school and friends have gone to them with all sorts of things – schoolwork, the morning after pill" Year 9 girls

"If a child likes a teacher they will work harder for that teacher" Secondary parents

"You'd know exactly what was happening.. You wouldn't feel as though you were intruding on important teaching time...I don't know who you ring up to speak to, if I've got a problem with the school or anything like that I never know who to ask for. I think do I ask for the form teacher or do I go to the head of the year or the head teacher, never quite sure who to speak to" Secondary parents

The choice of tutor and trusted adult were seen as key; they need to be trusted, approachable and trustworthy, and may not be a subject teacher. It may also be that academic and emotional support should be provided by different people.

"They should have somebody like that but it's got to be somebody...they feel they can go to" Secondary parents

"Sometimes as a teenager a parent can't get through to a child, not always. They can try but whether the child is going to take on board that advice. It's like going to see a counsellor." Secondary parents

"We have tutors but they're not necessarily who you'd trust most." Year 11 girls

"Say I'd got pregnant and I needed help, he's [tutor] the last person in the world I'd talk to because I see him all the time and I'd think he'd always be thinking about it, you know? You need someone more specialist like a counsellor, who you know isn't allowed to talk about it to just anyone." Year 11 girls

"There are counsellors but you need to be referred – I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to them anyway" Year 9 girls

5.1.4 Recognising additional needs:

The school makes sure that any child with additional needs or with behaviour problems has their needs identified and they are given access to the extra support they need

When it is needed schools can ask others to help pupils for example a school nurse, a social worker or a police officer

Pupils who have additional needs will be identified early and have their needs assessed and addressed using the most appropriate evidence-based interventions

Pupils with special needs will be helped to stay in mainstream schools

There was broad support for these ideas, with many again feeling this was largely already in place. For some, the concern was that the needs of those with behavioural or other problems were already dominating the agenda, and that 'ordinary' pupils were suffering as a result. Both parents and children found this frustrating, even though they supported the idea that children with special needs needed to be addressed and helped. There was a sense that schools needed to clearly distinguish between 'disruptive behaviour' and 'children with special needs' and not allow mainstream children to feel that others, who they considered less deserving, had overly special treatment that they could not access.

"I think that does happen on the whole. But you can't always identify a need... I find it quite annoying that a child that disrupts a class gets a one to one tutor. Say your daughter needs a little bit of help you won't get one will you... But if she started throwing chairs around... They've got the resources for that' Primary parents

'We have a support centre... Really important 'cos you don't want to think that there is no one to help you' Year 7 girls

"Rewarded for being naughty – they get one to one teaching" Secondary parents

"I've seen kids swearing at teachers and the teacher goes 'it's all right he's got his issues and we'll let him get away with it'... They have special treatment" Year 8 boys

"There is a group of teachers who will concentrate on these (seriously misbehaving kids) and they've got helpers following them around... but they get taken out on day trips... say they misbehave it will be 'oh you can go and sit on a laptop for the rest of the day doing what you want' (how does this make you feel?) annoyed... sometimes it will make you think they are being like this on purpose ... they are being taught to be bad to get good rewards... whereas students who are continuously good or working hard don't get rewarded in such a way" Year 10 boys

5.1.5 All pupils will be safe in school and every school will have behaviour, attendance and anti-bullying policies that work

This was seen as something that would be expected anyway, and had generally improved since the parents' own school days. There was some feeling that pupils being safe was nothing to boast about, but that having effective policies on behaviour, attendance and bullying (meaning these were not major problems) was a positive.

"You expect them to be safe in school – goes without saying, even if sometimes terrible things happen" Primary parents

"Sometimes too much fuss is made: Bullying is part of growing up and standing on your own two feet. You are not been bullied. You have just had a disagreement" Secondary parents

However some concerns were raised about how the most disruptive are effectively dealt with (and a concern that they might simply bring down the rest of the class) – some children held the perception that treatment was insufficient to act as an effective deterrent to bad behaviour. Informing parents of bad behaviour was seen as important from a parent's perspective, as well as ensuring they knew the positive news.

"The behaviour and attendance reports don't work because nothing bad happens to you if you go on the report – you have to stay behind for 10 minutes" Year 10 girls

"You need proper punishments – at the moment the ones who behave badly just don't care, they just play the system." Year 11 girls

Alongside dealing with disruptive pupils, encouraging pupils was also raised and both children and parents discussed the use of fair incentives to encourage children, such as sending postcards home, collecting points or rewards for good work and behaviour, school trips and winning prizes. Showing a personal interest was also raised as a route to encouragement e.g. head teachers interacting with pupils and tutor encouragement. Some of the children however expressed frustration when their consistent good behaviour went largely unrecognised and unrewarded.

"You get merits, and when you have enough, you get to go on a school trip. But sometimes they don't recognise the pupils who are good, only the ones who are improving. So it's like, in order to get the trip, you have to behave badly on purpose, just so you can be seen to improve? That makes no sense, it's not fair" Year 11 girls

"If one of my kids does something good I get a Congratulations postcard – the kids are delighted too!" Primary parents

"They get stars for doing well at things – lessons and behavior. Things like being a good buddy, helping a kid who's fallen over, that sort of thing. When they get 50 stars, they get a big gold star to bring home." Primary parents

"Mine just brought a gift card home for £30 for WH Smith's because he's done well in Maths and English, that's an incentive for him and nice" Secondary parents

5.1.6 Every child is given the right help to make decisions about subject choices and career options

The support required to make good choices was seen as important and also something that requires parent involvement as well as school expertise.

This was an area where existing processes involving parents e.g. parent evenings were sometimes thought of as being lightweight and where greater dialogue and a personalised tutor approach could really help.

“My son’s school’s way of picking options was a nightmare... it’s all colour coded and really complicated... There’s a list there for you or your child to choose them and then when you go to choose them they say I’m sorry you can’t do that, there’s too many people doing that for one reason or another” Secondary parents

“We had booklets sent home with a brief paragraph about each subject that you could choose as an option. We had this book for about two weeks then there was a children’s assembly where they were all informed and then a parent’s evening when we were all informed but then that was on a Wednesday and the following Monday it had to be in, so less than a week later from the parents finding out about it” Secondary parents

“When we had to choose our options, we only had a week, and I didn’t know what loads of them even meant. They had an internet link that didn’t work on most people’s computers.” Year 10 boys

“I don’t know if they’d be able to but like a month before you finish, do like a month of taster options. So if you pick them you like do the course for a month and if you don’t like them you can change them and try different varieties.” Year 10 boys

6 Involves and asks pupils their views, not just on their own learning and additional needs, but also on issues related to the school as a whole

Pupil involvement in school matters was seen as important by both pupils and parents, and was seen as increasingly the norm in most schools. While there might be some cynicism about the level of consultation, the exercise of democracy was seen as an undisputed good by almost all, although young people did want to feel their views are acted upon.

“It’s good because we get a say of what we want at school” Year 7 girls

“It’s the students’ school ‘cos we have to learn here” Year 8 boys

“Makes them feel more involved. The pupils’ decision sort of thing” Secondary parents

“We had the discussion about blazers – ended up keeping them and now wish we hadn’t – but we did vote” Year 8 girls

"(input into) the rules... Teachers aren't always in the circle of children so the children know what's going on" Year 8 boys

Making sure 'the right' children get elected – those with class credibility and commitment to the council - was seen as important.

"You don't just want the popular kids getting the votes" Year 7 girls

"It should be just for a term so as many as possible get a chance to be elected" Year 8 boy

"We get to vote who represents our classes in the school council. You don't just want people who have been voted in by teachers" Year 9 boys

"And if you've got a council that's your age and into what you like you can get your opinion across. But there is a downside, say if you're actually voting for someone it will be more like a popularity contest than about their opinions it will be more like "I like that person"...And some of the trouble makers have got into it and they don't turn up to meetings and we've never got our opinion across" Year 10 boys

Providing a variety of ways to input, including confidential routes, was also important.

"We should be able to tell the teacher what we think without them telling us off or getting into trouble" Year 7 girls

"A confidential way to submit information. We have a discussion board on our school website and people go in and post something on it and other people can reply or e-mail. It's like confidential" Year 8 boys

7 Is a resource for the whole community, building on the provision of access to extended services (including childcare), opening up its facilities for community use, providing wider opportunities for children, young people and their families to take part in sporting, play, recreational, cultural and learning activities, and offering easier access to other children's services within the local area

The notion of schools being a resource for the whole community was broadly supported, but with the caveat that the pupils' education and welfare should come first.

"When we had a swimming pool, the public came and used it and didn't get out in time, we missed half our lesson" Year 8 boys

"They do adult education in our school, but they don't come in at school times...(Is that a good idea?) You might have some strange people come in so from a safety point of view..." Year 8 boys

"It is a good thing they are coming in, but you like to feel it is your place even after school when you are doing something there" Year 8 girls

Offering childcare to school parents was welcomed, particularly at primary school level, as was providing a variety of after school activities and advice sources for children at both primary and secondary level.

"The after school clubs are great, and they're mostly free. There's waiting lists for a lot of them" Primary parents

It was seen as an efficient use of resources to allow the use of the facilities outside school hours, but there was only limited belief that this approach would have any impact on the quality of the core educational experience, and sometimes the benefits were questioned, particularly if the resource was already available elsewhere.

"It's really good that people like old people can come into the school and use the facilities and have groups and things. Our school has a good gym and we do reduced prices for pensioners to use it. It's a nice thing we can do for them, it makes you feel quite, I dunno, proud." Year 7 girls

"If they are making money off it then so much the better I suppose" Secondary Parents

"Adult education I suppose...Jobs, benefit advice, you've got the Job Centre for that. (Why good?) It would be in the evening I suppose" Secondary Parents

The type of activity and who the facilities were being accessed by raised questions and some voiced strong concerns about safety and privacy issues, particularly when there was a lack of perceived fit with education. For example offering adult education was easier to accept than offering the use of the facilities to support groups or advice on issues such as drugs or alcohol misuse for the wider community.

"Yes, there are photographs of the children up there and the names are on the pictures often" Primary parents

"I don't think I'd like the fact that these people could come into school during school hours, it's the safety issue... You wouldn't want drug addicts on the premises.... It doesn't seem right to go and talk about drug problems or sexual health problems, to go to school...One of the teachers might be going home late and recognise you!" Secondary parents

"Is it not better for them to signpost, otherwise what you're doing is duplicating things...It's about maintaining closer co-operation between the different services and not necessarily bringing all the different services to deliver the same thing in different locations" Primary parents

Linking up of schools and providing wider support for children in the community was seen as a positive concept so long as children in that particular school would not be negatively affected. Concrete examples of how this might work were needed to bring the issue to life.

"There is a new Academy opening – I suppose this is what that will be all about, seems like a good idea to me" Secondary parent

8 Involves parents and carers in the child's learning and development

Primary parents felt much more involved in the child's learning and development both emotionally and educationally, while involvement among secondary parents was less. This reflected firstly the loss of the school gate forum that meant parents were more regularly at the primary school and thus knew about things first-hand. There was also a sense that the needs of the secondary school required greater skills and that children did not encourage too much parental involvement, either with homework or within the school grounds, as they got older. Secondary parents also expressed the feeling that they were less qualified to help with secondary-subject homework, as their child's knowledge might outstrip their own.

"I think supporting children at home with their homework is easier with a young child than an older one. I don't go through my teenager's bags to see if they've got homework, I ask them and I trust them to tell me whether they have or they haven't. Whereas the young one I go through his book bag" Secondary parents

"It's getting harder for the schools, there's an awful lot of input from the parents. You need to do all the extra little bits" Primary parent

"You are only really involved if they are naughty" Secondary parents

"We can get as involved as we want to be in the learning and extra-curricular stuff like fundraisers. The schools are delighted to get the help. I go in twice a week and read to them." Primary parent

Although many parents were happy with this status quo and did not want a strong role or active engagement in school e.g. on committees or as a governor, others claimed to be willing to become more involved in the school.

"You're always going to get parents who think they know best, but you should leave decisions like the curriculum and targets to the experts" Primary parents

"As more families have got both parents who work full time it's quite difficult. I've had to take time off work to go and do it" Primary parents

"I'm not very involved in the school itself. I haven't had a lot of trouble with him at school" Secondary parents

There was a sense that parents could be supported more to help their children at home, especially if they felt it would help the school deliver a better experience back to their child. Lack of information and contact between parent and school was clearly a barrier and a broader range of communication channels would be welcomed.

"(You) have parents evening, but lots of things you let pass, you only get three minutes" Secondary parents

"Now I can go on the web and get a worksheet – it is brilliant" Secondary parent

"Put the homework on a website and work the website rather than just having it as a brochure site" Primary parents

"Keeping you informed on a more regular basis" Primary parents

9 Expectations about safety

Although safety is extremely important, it was not top of mind for parents until prompting, and was often expected as being delivered already, both in terms of legal requirements and common sense. Expectations about age-appropriate restrictions were that they will be based on legal requirements, common sense and reflect the wide variety of maturity and trust-worthiness within any age group. Parents did however expect their children to be overseen at all times during focused activities such as lessons or clubs with signing in and out, and notification if they did not attend activities they were due to attend. They expected more 'light touch' supervision in break-times and communal areas just to guarantee safety.

"Got to have a responsible adult to be there...They are there for a reason, to be taught something" Secondary parents