Chapter 6

Utilising Learning Management Systems to Involve and Engage Parents, Families and the Community in Children’s Learning

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ABSTRACT

Parents, families, and the community are, and should be, an integral part of every school. Parental and community involvement has the potential to positively impact a child’s academic and social confidence, competence, and performance. There are many ways schools can support and encourage this involvement. This chapter provides examples of how schools can, and have, engaged parents, families, and the community in children’s learning via parent portals and learning management systems.

INTRODUCTION

Education should not be seen as simply a government responsibility, as the future of our nations depend on our ability to work in partnership with families and the wider community (Selby, Ryba, & Falloon, 2005). “In order for schools in any nation to effectively educate all youth, families and communities must become partners in the process” (Sanders & Epstein, 2005, p. 203). “Just about all families care about their children ... just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families ... just about all students ... want their families to be more knowledgeable
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partners about schooling” (Epstein, 1995, p. 703). Few would doubt the importance of the involvement of family and community and supporting children’s learning. In 1995, Epstein identified six major types of involvement between school, family and community. These were:

1. **parenting**: helping develop home environments that support children as students;
2. **communicating**: developing effective two-way communication about school programmes and children’s progress;
3. **volunteering**: recruiting and organizing help and support;
4. **learning at home**: providing information, ideas and opportunities about how to help students at home;
5. **decision making**: including parents in school governance; and
6. **collaborating with community**: identifying and integrating resources and services from the community, families and schools.

Although times have changed, as have methods of communication, it is no less important now than it was in the previous century to involve family and community in school life. Arguably, the main issue to consider is: What is the optimal vehicle for these interactions? Children of today are very different from those of yesteryear. They have been raised in a world of constant change and most have the ability to constantly communicate with others through new technology such as mobile phones, netbooks and iPads (Donnison, 2007). These digital devices have enhanced communication through virtual environments of social network sites, instant messaging and email. This social interaction is a key part of the make-up of this new generation (Prensky, 2004). The educational sector is striving to ensure school–family–community partnerships are meeting the needs of our current learners. In order to support their learning, parents, families and the community can, and must be, aware of, and involved in, this digital environment and new technologies.

This chapter is designed to offer suggestions about how this may be achieved. Initially a brief section will be provided to explain differences brought about by this new generation. Many countries have revised their school curricula in order to cater for these new learners’ needs. This includes the newly developed 2007 New Zealand curriculum. A succinct account will describe how this curriculum has been designed to support the learning of current and future generation whilst advocating parent and community involvement. Initiatives such as learning management systems and, in particular, parent portals will be outlined as these are increasingly being used to support school–family–community partnerships. A large proportion of the chapter will be devoted to providing examples of successful partnership links and interactions via parent portals. This chapter will provide strategies and examples using school learning management systems and parent portals, linked to Epstein’s (1995) six major types of school–family–community involvement.

**PREPARING CHILDREN FOR THE FUTURE**

A dominant theme of the 21st century has been that of rapid technological developments and unexpected change and, as educators, it is vital we are aware of how to support and maximise learning in this new environment. Increasingly today’s students are living their lives online and the education that is provided must acknowledge and value this. The majority of these “students are digital natives, social learners, experiential and participatory-oriented and multi-taskers” (Farmer, 2009, p. 52). Schools and educators need to consider strategies that can be used to appeal to the learning preferences and communication needs of these Generation Y/NeXters/Millennial learners (Donnison, 2007) while at the same time...