



3 Getting the Facts About Parent Participation in the School

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Resources

For answers to your questions, to learn more about a subject or to find the right tools or resources... contact the FCPPQ.

We offer:

- advice;
- information brochures;
- references;
- training workshops.

Visit our web site www.fcppq.qc.ca or contact your regional association through the Parents' Committee at your School Board.

Credits

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Parent participation in the school: Greater than ever!



Parent participation is everywhere in education. Over the last thirty years, it has progressively expanded to the point where it is now seen as an indispensable part of the Quebec school system.

The Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec (FCPPQ), the federation of this province's Parents' Committee, has played a key role in this expansion and plans to continue to do so; parent participation in schools is now our fundamental mission.

As part of the FCPPQ training program, this document provides an overview of parent participation. It is also a tool to stimulate reflection for those who want to encourage parent commitment to student success.

Document survey

The first six pages of this document present **the many facets of parent participation** in school life. Participation takes on a variety of forms as parents become increasingly involved in school activities and the structures provided for this purpose.

- The first duty of parents: Helping their children succeedpage 2
- The many opportunities to participate in school lifepage 3
- One step further: Becoming directly involved in school lifepages 3 and 4

In the following two pages, **the current situation concerning parent participation** is examined. Participation is carried on in different ways and to differing degrees. It has times of strength as well as its share of constraints or mitigated successes. Nevertheless, it is indispensable to improving the quality of education.

- What is the current state of parent participation?pages 5 and 6

Then, we look at **developing participation** and how to pursue this objective.

- Developing parent participation: Whose move?page 7
- Taking into account the diversity of situationspage 8
- Conditions for successful participationpage 9

In conclusion, the Federation suggests further thought be given to this matter in your school.

- Are you concerned with parent participation?page 10

The first duty of parents: Helping their children succeed



The first form of school participation concerns all parents **individually**: to help their child succeed in school. This is a **fundamental responsibility** that no parent can neglect without risking his or her child's future.

It's normal for parents to want the best possible education for their children. This commitment begins at birth and continues as the children grow to adulthood and even beyond.

To help children succeed in school primarily means:

- **to be attentive and involved.** Listen to them when they get home from school, help with school work, pay attention to what they are learning, check that they are doing well and if necessary, contact school staff members;
- **to ask** about their progress, to find ways to follow what is going on in the school and to learn about the latest developments in the academic world;
- **to be present** for meetings with teachers, for report card time and for meetings to set up individualized education plans if the child is experiencing difficulties. In short, parents must act as true partners in their children's development since they know their children better than anyone else.

The effects of parents' commitment to their children have already been widely demonstrated (Epstein, J., 1987):

"The evidence is clear that parental encouragement, activities and interest at home, and participation in schools and classrooms affect children's achievements, attitudes and aspirations, even after students' abilities and family socio-economic status are taken into account. Students gain in personal and academic development if their families emphasize school, let the children know they do, and do so continuously over the school year."

The many opportunities to participate in school life



On another level, parent participation is becoming more **collective**. A great many parents make it their duty to participate in activities such as:

- **Attending** special school activities such as concerts, holiday celebrations, fairs and award ceremonies. Children retain vivid memories of their presence and recognize the importance their parents place on education.
- **Giving their opinions** in consultations and surveys as when future directions for the school's educational project are being decided, for example. Parents' opinions, when well structured and based on broad consensus, have an enormous power of influence on the development of educational services and on the way the school is run.
- **Becoming involved as volunteers** in the library, the computer lab, in organizing activities and fundraising, etc. Many parents are ready to invest time and energy when given the opportunity.

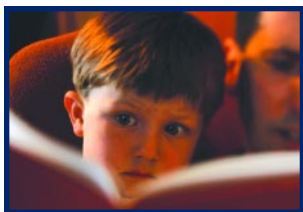
A study conducted in the United States (Amundson, K., NSBA, 1988) demonstrated the numerous benefits of programs to develop parent participation:

- parents who participate develop more positive attitudes towards the school and its staff;
- teachers who become involved in parent participation programs improve their teaching methods; those reporting excellent parent-teacher relations experience more job satisfaction;
- parent participation programs are effective ways to add to the school's achievements for the benefit of the pupils.

One step further: Becoming directly involved in school life

Going one step further means becoming involved in the participation structures provided for in the Education Act.

- **The General Assembly** is the gateway to parents' involvement in the school. Attending this meeting is important in order to learn what is happening in schools, to elect parent representatives and, perhaps even to stand as candidates for one of the positions (see Leaflet 2 of the Federation training program).
- **The Governing Board** is the best place to participate in making important decisions concerning the school and the pupils. Here, dialogue with others involved in the school is encouraged. Being elected to the Governing Board places a parent at the center of school life.



- The Parent Participation Organization is an exceptional vehicle for parent participation, should the General Assembly decide to form one. This type of involvement fosters a closer relationship between the school and its milieu (see Leaflet 1 of the Federation training program).

Parents whose children attend Day-care can also participate in the **Parent Users of Day-care Committee**, should the Governing Board set up such a committee.

That summarizes direct participation in the school. People dedicated to the development of quality educational services can also participate at other levels.

- **The Parents' Committee** is the official intermediary between parents and the school board. Those who agree to be involved on this committee are able to exercise a power of influence on decisions that concern all schools and collaborate on educating and informing all parent participants of the available resources.
- **The Advisory Committee on Transportation and the Advisory Committee on Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities** act as advisory bodies to the school board. Parents are also invited to sit on these committees.
- **The Council of Commissioners** of the school board is composed of citizens elected by universal vote and of two parents chosen by the Parents' Committee to represent the expectations, positions and demands of parents.

Parents have provided themselves with other means of participation and representation, over and above the provisions in the Education Act.

- **The Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec (FCPPQ)** is the principal organization in Quebec dedicated to defending parents' interests and increasing parent participation in the school system.
- **Other provincial organizations** seek to develop services intended for different categories of students, such as the Learning Disabilities Association of Quebec (LDAQ).
- **A branch of the Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec (FCPPQ)** is present in each region of Quebec; it is a place for regional exchange and dialogue.
- **Services for the English-speaking community** offered by the Federation provide a place of exchange, support and dialogue to English-speaking parents who are often in the minority in their communities.



The following is a summary of the benefits of parent participation in these structures (Forest, P.G., et al., GRIG, 2000):

- it permits **exchange of information**; administrators who have a better idea of parents' values and preferences can make the best possible decisions; parents and, in particular, students benefit from the shared knowledge made possible by these systems of participation;
- it encourages interest groups involved in the school to **work more closely together**; through dialogue and greater mutual understanding, all those involved in education can achieve a true partnership, which always benefits the students;
- in one sense, it ensures that the general public **takes charge** of services that are intended for them.

To sum up, parents who become involved in participation structures exercise an important **power of influence**, and the first to benefit are the children.

What is the current state of parent participation?

Many people wonder about the current state of parent participation, and with good reason. For example, in March 2001, at a crucial time of major reform in education, the Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance (a council on family and child) felt the need to issue a statement stressing the importance of parent participation.

What assessment can we make of parent participation in the school system in light of current research and the experiences of the parents themselves? The Federation felt it was important to express its point of view on this subject also.

First finding – Families have changed

It is pointless to dwell on the major transformations the family has undergone. We must simply remember that they have a direct impact on parent availability and on communication between home and school.

Second finding – Parents' expectations are changing

Young parents are usually more educated and often more aware of the realities of school life. They hope for more from schools than they themselves had as children and adolescents. Many have used child-care services before bringing their children to school; they expect to find the same friendly atmosphere and establish the same meaningful relationships with school personnel. The home/school relationship can no longer be the same for this new generation of parents.



Following extensive consultation on the state of education in Quebec in 1995, the Estates General on Education reported that a sense of unease exists regarding the place of parents in the school:

*"Parents often have the impression of being kept on the fringe of the more significant school activities, or relegated to a supporting role. They want greater recognition of their abilities."
(Final Report, 1996, p. 43.)*

Third finding – Yes, parents participate, but...

We sometimes hear it said that parents do not get involved. This seems to be inaccurate. Parents are usually there when it counts: on a daily basis with their children, in large numbers during group activities or when a serious problem arises and action must be taken. It is true that their participation at official meetings, elections and other types of organized participation does not always meet target objectives. We must be realistic about this type of social involvement, which is often assumed by a minority of the population. In this respect, the academic sector need not be jealous of several other public activity sectors.

Fourth finding – A certain unease persists in the parent/school relationship

We are obliged to acknowledge that the quality of active participation in schools varies greatly. There is often a sense of unease in the relationship between parents and the school. What place rightfully belongs to parents? What is their role? To what extent do teaching methods concern them? Should the school become more open or keep a more reserved profile? People answer these questions very differently depending on their perceptions, past experiences and ideas about school.

It must be admitted that some parents do not really know how to participate in schools. At times, they do so awkwardly, without regard for the roles and responsibilities of the other partners in education.

Yes, more than one parent or school staff member has been disillusioned by past experiences. However, there are many who still believe in parent participation and make every effort to ensure the quality of the involvement.

Fifth finding – The game has not yet been won

The goal of recent changes to participation structures is to develop a real partnership between parents, community and school. We must remember, however, that these changes do not bring immediate results. Parents who participate on the Governing Board or the Parent Participation Committee are in a position to know that the difficulties associated with parent participation did not instantly disappear when the new structures were put in place. That feeling of unease often remains.

Conclusion

Our assessment of the state of parent participation in the school is positive, but with some reservations. Because of this, we must expressly concern ourselves with developing parent participation if we want it to bring about the expected results. We will discuss this in the following pages.

Developing parent participation: Whose move is it?



The Parent Participation Organization (PPO), as described in the Education Act, is directly involved in this work:

"The purpose of a parent participation organization is to encourage the collaboration of parents in developing, implementing and periodically evaluating the school's educational project and their participation in fostering their child's academic success."

First, the parents'

Who in fact is responsible for developing parent participation? The Federation believes it is, first of all, the parents' responsibility to work towards developing this participation. We formally invite parents to ensure that the place of parents in the school continues to evolve. This responsibility naturally falls on them, since they have the primary responsibility for their children's education.

Next, the school

The school also shares this responsibility and must be resolute in its commitment to developing this participation. The current reform in education may involve a lot of work, but it must not be to the detriment of parent involvement. On the contrary, participative management that integrates the contribution of parents is essential to the success of this reform and, in the end, to improving success rates among children. In this context, the school's two management groups, that is, the Governing Board and the school administration, in their respective roles, must be concerned with developing parent participation. Normally, the educational project should determine the directions and means to this end.

The PPO, a precious tool

This definition of the PPO's role demonstrates the importance the law attaches to the development of parent participation and its relationship to the academic success of students. In the current context, the success of all students has become a national priority in education; consequently, forming a PPO, originally optional, becomes a necessity. Where PPOs do exist, they cannot be content to simply act as advisory committees.

The Parents' Committee and other organizations

For their part, Parents' Committees must provide support to parents in the schools and encourage everyone to reflect on the place of parents in education. It goes without saying that other educational organizations, such as the Ministry of Education, school boards and various associations and federations involved in the school network, must support this development.

Taking into account the diversity of situations



Parent participation evolves differently depending on the characteristics of the milieu. Some special situations have a direct impact on participation.

- It has been demonstrated that schools that have developed special projects chosen by the parents elicit increased parent participation.
- The **English-speaking community** enjoys a long tradition of active parent involvement, which lends a special character to English schools.
- Participation **in underprivileged areas** presents particular challenges. Parents may feel powerless or intimidated by the school. Therefore, it is up to the school to reach out to these parents in a special way. This means that a school team must mobilize around this project. For children to succeed, parent participation is as essential, if not more so, in these communities.
- In **multi-ethnic communities**, cultural and linguistic barriers often get in the way of parent participation. Special measures must be put in place to ensure integration of these families into the community. It should be noted that children may play a key role in this integration.
- A special approach is also needed for **native communities**. It is important that family participation programs be set up with their involvement, rather than for them.
- **Regional disparities** and, in particular, the size of some territories, have a direct effect on the development of participation.
- The notable difference in parent participation between **elementary schools and secondary schools** is quite evident. Are parents of secondary schools not as concerned as those of elementary schools?

With such a diversity of contexts, it is advisable to thoroughly evaluate one's own situation before rushing into activities to promote parent participation.

Conditions for successful participation



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Margaret Mead

A firm determination to commit to the goal of parent participation is the first requirement for ensuring lasting development. The following elements must also be considered:

Establish a climate of confidence between partners, if this has not already been accomplished:

- conquer isolation,
- overcome misunderstandings,
- set aside disappointments caused by past experiences,
- learn to know yourself,
- respect the roles of others.

Agree to share what you know and what you don't know:

- allow time to talk, to listen and to understand each other's differences (Bouchard, C., AQETA, 2001).

Rely on strong and effective leadership:

- have a long-term vision,
- set priorities,
- make it a point to be organized and build confidence step by step, from victory to victory,
- stand together when the temptation is to give up,
- celebrate success.

See to it that everyone is a winner:

- respect each other's particular motives for participating,
- believe that everyone can and should grow from the experience.

Let's talk about real partnership

A mission such as this does not happen by magic; it requires determination and energy. Parent participation has gone beyond the stage of simple consultation and volunteering just to help out. Parents are now urged to be equal partners in education. As a result of their responsibilities towards their children's success, parents can come to the school confident they have a place there. As partners, they come to the school with the greatest respect for those who work with their children every day. For its part, the Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec is committed to pursuing this mission in order to achieve a real partnership across the Quebec school network.

Are you concerned with parent participation?

- Have all facets of home and school collaboration been developed?
- What are the advantages of parent participation, for the parents themselves and for the school?
- Do parents feel comfortable in the school?
- Is there resistance to parent participation?
- Is there adequate communication between home and school?
- Is there one group of parents who is not present in the school?
- What support can we depend on to develop participation?
- What elements must we possess to increase parent participation?

In this document, you will find cause for reflection in answer to the above questions, to your questions and to those of your milieu.

