

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR LEARNING

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Community involvement in schools is a broad umbrella for a host of new relationships in support of public education. These relationships are particularly being fostered through the Community Support for Education Component of the PALE Module of the BELS Programme. As the Coordinator, I have been paying regular visits to nearly all eleven participating countries to work with National Resource People and other trainers on introducing and/or expanding community support activities at the primary school level.

Community Support means getting parents to share the responsibility for raising student achievement, ensuring good health, making sure their children study and do homework, learning about the standards students are expected to reach, volunteering to help in classrooms and even offering their worksites for field trips.

The changing role of the school today has important potential impact on the child's parents and family. Parents and families are now viewed as vital to the child's successful performance in school. When parents become aware of the child's learning needs, they will be more able to provide encouragement, assistance and support in the home. Therefore, they will become more closely involved in the child's education.

It is often surprising how useful parents can be, even those who cannot speak, read and write English, the so-called "uneducated" ones. Too often we are blinded by the belief that only teachers can teach children but try involving parents and much will be achieved. For instance we can encourage parents to teach their children traditional knowledge through verbal instruction and practical demonstration.

This is learning to	-	plant/weave/ fish/build a house
	-	cook
	-	live in a clean environment
	-	respect/listen to adults and to develop positive habits

Whether they do it consciously or unconsciously, all children work hard to do what they believe is expected of them. As parents we can tap into a tremendous power to motivate our children simply by making clear what we expect of them.

Improving Community Support for Schools

Since headteachers, teachers, parents and members of the larger community all have a role to play, when it comes to improving community support for schools, it becomes important for these groups to have a good understanding of how their school might go about developing this activity. The school and the people who work in it, must accept responsibility for what happens in the school and must also play a role in using the community to help the school improve the quality of basic education.

The School and the Community

Different people's roles in education should not be conflicting but complementary. A well-established working relationship between the teachers and the parents and the members of the larger community can positively contribute to the learning and development of the students in a school. In the final analysis, the headteacher and his/her staff are in the best position to foster the required relationship amongst all parties, ensuring that such activities as mentioned below are properly coordinated for the benefit of the students. The following practical steps can be taken:

1. The classroom teacher arranges meetings with his/her students' parents to provide basic information on the various class programmes and to indicate how parents can assist. Parents must be made to believe that they can in a lot of ways contribute successfully to the running of the class.
2. A variety of well organised PTA functions can be organised to bring people together, creating a better understanding all around.

3. Regular meetings of the School Management PTA Committee, Headteacher and staff representative can be held to ensure that information is made available.

PTA Meeting with a Difference

In the old days, a meeting with parents would start with a vote on the new PTA president/new treasurer/new secretary or dues etc.

Now you go to schools that are doing well on Community and Parents Support and they start their PTA Meetings differently. They say, "Ni sa bula vinaka!" or "Hello everyone, behind me on the wall is an example of the class maths homework. On the other side is the class maths scores which you can see are taking a dip."

More importantly, at the end of the meeting parents will have learned how they can help to substantially improve their children's academic performance.

The results of stepped-up parental commitment are very encouraging and we look forward to steady improvements in general basic educational achievement over the following years, which parents and other community members can feel particularly proud of because they will have shared in bringing these about.