Executive Summary

The Connected Education project

In 2009, Turning Point was commissioned by East Sussex Children and Young People's Trust to undertake a large-scale peer-led action research project. The research sought to explore in depth the factors impacting upon aspiration and achievement in five secondary school communities, and to identify ways in which the schools could build closer relationships with parents as a means of enabling them to become more involved in their children's learning. The project is believed to be the first of its kind to take place in the UK.

The rationale

Compelling research evidence points to the fundamental role that parents play in shaping their children's aspirations and educational outcomes. Parental involvement in a child's learning has a significant effect on achievement throughout the years of schooling, and is a more powerful force than family background or parental education. Parents who believe they have the ability to help their children are more likely to hold higher aspirations for them. Moreover, parental aspirations have a positive influence equivalent to four additional terms progression at school. Inversely, the likelihood of educational underachievement is increased by a lack of parental interest in schooling.

Young people themselves have an important role to play; aspirations to stay on in education post-16 have an effect equivalent to 1½ terms additional learning. Parental involvement is also strongly influenced by the child's attainment: the greater the attainment, the more parents get involved.

The type of parental involvement that makes the most difference is 'at home talk' which shows an active interest in a child's learning and future. Schools have a crucial role to play in promoting this with parents, but there must first exist a culture of collaboration between schools and parents. The quality of this relationship determines not only the extent to which parents and schools are able to work in partnership, but also the messages communicated to young people about the value of education and learning.

The context

Each of the schools participating in the Connected Education project serves a largely white working class neighbourhood with extensive and profound social, economic and educational deprivation. Across the country, young people growing up in communities with high levels of deprivation are less likely to develop challenging aspirations and are more likely educationally to underachieve. This is something that affects future life outcomes and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and deprivation. Nationally, aspirations are lowest in white working class communities.

The parent research

26 parents were recruited to become Community Researchers and undertake the research. The recruitment process aimed to be as inclusive as possible and parents did not need any qualifications or experience. The diversity of the parent Community Researchers meant that each brought individual experiences, views, skills and knowledge to create a rich resource for the project. They received two days of training, during which they explored the reasons for the project taking place and the role of parents in supporting their children with learning, including barriers to involvement. Each parent was encouraged to reflect upon and share their own experiences. The second day focused on developing the skills and knowledge necessary for carrying out the research. Regular 'Next Steps' meetings ensured that the parent Community Researchers were able to plan together, share experiences of interviewing, develop solutions to difficulties and talk through emerging findings. The team achieved 414 in-depth interviews

with other parents, averaging an hour in length and mostly carried out in people's homes. For many of the parent Community Researchers, involvement in the project has had a profound impact: *'Going round meeting people in pairs, we all formed a strong bond of shared experience, particularly if they were emotionally charged, as quite a few were. Going into people's homes, sitting on their sofas and drinking tea with them encouraged them to open up to a degree that we could never have anticipated. As the training had been a prejudice buster, this was even more so. Some of the people who live in the most notorious areas were the most welcoming and candid. Because we were their peers, parents just like them, they didn't feel they had to be on their guard, or like we were trying to catch them out. It was a very powerful experience.'*

The student research

Schools nominated 29 students from Years 8 to 10 to become student Community Researchers. The nominated students reflected the diversity of the schools' populations in that their needs and abilities varied widely. One Year 9 student, identified as gifted and talented but also presenting with challenging behaviour, describes her experience as a Community Researcher: *'From doing the Turning Point project I found I was able to get to know more people in the school and felt I was able to talk to people I would not normally talk to. The project also enabled me to spend more time with people who were not in my year, which helped me greatly because my confidence was boosted. I also felt I was able to be more comfortable around these people. I enjoyed meeting new people.'*

The student Community Researchers received a full day of training and went on to undertake 275 face-to-face interviews with peers across the five schools. In addition, 789 students completed an online survey, and 14 Focus Groups were facilitated by professional researchers to explore in more depth some of the emerging themes from the research.

Findings from the research

Findings detailed in this report focus on:

- Parental aspirations for children in Hastings and Eastbourne, including the impact of different circumstances and experiences
- Young people's own aspirations and influences upon these
- Parental views of the relationship between home and school, including influences on and barriers to successful communication and relationships
- Opportunities for extending parental involvement in children's learning and working with parents as partners
- Young people's views on how their learning experience could be enhanced

Understanding Aspirations: the Parent Perspective (Chapter 4: p22-39)

Overall, parental aspirations for children across the five schools are lower than the national average; 77% of parents want their child to continue in full-time education after Year 11 compared with a national average among low income families of 85%. Despite this, there are indications that aspirations have improved over a generation; there are stark differences between the routes that parents took at 16 and their expectations for the routes that their child will take. For example, 40% of parents went straight into work at 16 but only 5% would like their child to do the same. Over 95% of parents think qualifications are important for their child's future, although some feel that this should not have to be the case. The large majority feel that responsibility for helping children prepare for the future is shared equally between schools and parents.

Within the research sample, parents from Hastings appear to have higher aspirations for their children than parents from Eastbourne. This may be explained in part by the fact that overall, parents from Hastings tended to have greater levels of educational participation and

achievement; for many as adult learners. The more a parent has engaged with education themselves, the more optimistic they are likely to be about their child's future, the more likely they are to want their child to remain in full-time education post-16, and the clearer they are about what they would like their child to achieve in the future. Moreover, the higher the level of parental qualification, the more likely the parent is to have talked to their child about the future and to believe that they have the greater responsibility for preparing young people for the future.

By contrast, parents with few or no formal qualifications are much more likely to say that their child can do 'whatever they want' when they reach 16 and are able to leave school. Further, parents with limited educational engagement themselves are far more likely to be unsure of their child's academic potential; 17% of parents with no formal qualifications say they don't know what their child will achieve, compared with 8% of other parents.

For some parents there is a mismatch between their aspirations and educational expectations for their child. Parents with no formal qualifications tend to have relatively high career aspirations for their child, but low educational expectations. Those parents whose highest qualification is Level 3 (mainly NVQ3) want their child broadly to 'do well' in education and work but are less likely than other parents to hold specific goals and are more likely to say their child can do 'whatever they want'. This indicates that for a number of parents, there is not a clear link between educational achievement, career achievement and socio-economic mobility. Nor is there an understanding of the importance of the parental role in fostering high aspirations in children.

Parents with a child with special educational needs (SEN) are less likely than other parents to know what their child is capable of achieving academically and are also less optimistic about their child's future, although a similar proportion wants their child to continue into full-time education post-16. They would like more access to practical career paths for their children, with almost a quarter hoping that their child would go on to achieve a successful career in a skilled trade. Parents with a child with SEN tend to hold aspirational values related to independence, confidence and personal responsibility, rather than more specific career goals or educational achievements.

Parents with a child in receipt of Free School Meals have lower expectations than other parents of their child's educational achievement. They are more likely to be pessimistic about their child's future and are less likely to have talked to their child about the future. They are more likely than other parents to think that responsibility for preparing young people for the future lies with the school more than with parents. This could reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding of how to support young people; the idea of *'leaving it to the professionals'*. Despite having low educational aspirations, parents with a child in receipt of FSM tend to have high career aspirations for their child. This highlights again the gap in parental understanding of the specific educational pathways required to achieve more aspirational careers.

Understanding Aspirations: the Student Perspective (Chapter 5: p40-50)

Young people are generally ambivalent about the future, with only 1 in 10 saying that they care 'a lot' about the future, and 4 in 10 saying that they don't care very much. Although the great majority (95%) think that qualifications are important, only 65% see themselves continuing in education post-16. This is lower than the proportion of parents who want their children to continue on in education.

Nevertheless, over 80% of young people state that having a job in the future is very important to them and the majority have thought about the type of job they would like to do. When asked about longer term aspirations, the most popular response from young people was to have a 'good job'.

Young people identify a number of influences upon their aspirations. Encouragement and support from parents is considered vital: *'It's not just about school…your mum and dad encouraging you and helping you more…'cause if you don't have that then you think there's no need to go to school, 'cause no-one's really bothered about it.'*

Two-thirds of young people say that they talk to their parent about the future, with many describing the balance between 'encouraging' and 'pushing' as important. However, 31% say that they hardly ever or never talk to their parent about the future.

Young people place great onus upon personalisation within education, and value schools tailoring educational opportunities to enable students with differing abilities to define and achieve their goals. Most young people believe that school staff care about how well they do, but a large proportion (over two-thirds) say that their teachers do not talk often to them about the future, with 25% saying their teachers never talk to them about the future.

Young people also highlighted the importance of:

- Qualifications that are relevant and linked to future career aspirations
- Support to understand and develop employability qualities
- Skills identification as a means of *'finding out what you're good at'*
- Teachers willing to *'go the extra mile'*
- A wider range of support programmes such as Aim Higher
- Wider and improved work experience opportunities: *'The usual idea of working in a shop…doesn't give you much of an idea of what you could do'*
- More personalised careers advice including advice about career 'routes' and not just specific jobs: *'If you're good at something, like one subject…how do you know about all the jobs you could do for that subject…what jobs to ask about?'*
- Access to workplace and career role models: *'If you don't know anyone whose like, an engineer or something, how do you know what that actually is…if you're going to like it?'*
- Advice about financial support and money management

Communication and Relationships: The Parent-School Interface (Chapter 6: p51-70)

Parents have very similar views regarding the information they would like from schools. They want to know:

- what is happening in their child's school life: *'School needs to let us know immediately if there's a problem, not wait until parents evening'*
- how their child is progressing: *'More personal feedback from subject teachers on how my child is progressing'*
- more 'good news' about their child's achievements: *'I got a phone call from my daughter's Science teacher telling me how well she was doing. I was really proud and thrilled that the teacher had taken the time to phone.'*
- how to help their child: *'We need guidance for parents. Don't assume we know everything! We need an Idiot's Guide!'*

Parental experiences of communication and relationships vary greatly. The schools have a tendency to use forms of communication that favour those parents with higher levels of education, and as a result parents' own levels of educational engagement are a key factor in determining successful relationships with schools.

Parents identify a range of barriers in their communication with schools and it is clear that different parents value different forms of communication. IT can be both a bridge and a barrier for parents. A single negative experience can permanently damage the relationship between parent and school, and in particular, the emotive issue of bullying is one that can undermine the relationship between school and parent.

Whole-school communication processes between schools and non-resident parents are generally reported as inadequate and contributing towards parental disengagement: *'Contact (needs to go) to both myself and my ex-wife…I pass on as much information as possible…but my ex-wife should receive every letter (that I do) as well as invites to events (and) reports'.*

Parents with a child with special educational needs (SEN) are more likely than other parents to have polarised experiences of communication and relationships. Often these are based upon very individual experiences around their child's needs and how these are met. One of the biggest issues for those parents who rate communication poorly is a perception that schools do not ask for or take the views of the parent seriously when planning how to support the child in school: *'They need to listen more when you have a difficult child'*.

Parents with a child in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) typically have poorer experiences of communication and relationships. Only 36.9% rate communication positively, compared with 50.6% of other parents. Moreover, 37.1% of parents with a child in receipt of FSM feel that schools are 'not very' or 'not at all' approachable compared with just 16.4% of other parents.

Parents make a number of suggestions for improving home-school communication:

- SMS texting is universally popular where it is used by schools and could be extended to include not only information on a child's attendance but also reminders about trips, events, homework, letters due home and so on.

- Face-to-face contact is valued, but could be improved for those parents less familiar or confident with education environments. Parents with a child with SEN are most likely to want greater opportunities for face-to-face contact.

- Parents Evenings are stressful for many parents. Where they have experienced both, parents prefer the more relaxed Academic Review Days as they offer *'all times of day…available…so it fits around work'*. The main suggestion for improvement is that parents would like more access to subject teachers as well as tutors.

- Parents would like more regular phone contact with tutors, so they don't just hear from schools *'when something goes wrong'*. Phone calls are valued mostly by parents with a child with SEN and parents with fewer qualifications.

- Parents would like access to individual staff contact details. Parents with higher levels of education would like email addresses. Parents with a child with SEN and those with a child in receipt of FSM would like telephone extension numbers.

- Parents like letters posted home but realise it is expensive to post all letters. They suggest that schools could send a text alert when a letter is given to a child to carry home. They also suggest schools could save money by posting only one copy of a letter rather than several duplicates where there is more than one child in a family.

- Newsletters are popular but format, layout and content are important to ensure that they are accessible to all parents, including those with low literacy.

- Parents like student planners and would like to see them used more consistently.

Parents as Partners (Chapter 7: p71-96)

Parental involvement in children's learning can be broadly grouped into three categories. These are 'at home' talk, providing practical help and resources, and help with homework. Schools have a pivotal role to play in facilitating parental involvement in children's learning.

This is crucial because the parents of the least advantaged young people are those least likely to say that they feel involved in their children's learning. In addition, large numbers of parents do not recognise the significance of their own role and attitude in shaping their children's aspirations and achievements. This is especially true for those parents whose children are the least advantaged.

Large numbers of parents do not initiate or engage regularly in the form of 'at home' talk that makes a difference to young people's aspirations and achievements; that is, taking an *active interest* in education and schooling. Instead, 'at home' talk tends to be a reactive rather than active process. For many, 'advice and support' takes the form of helping the child with a problem or worry. Often the onus is on the child to start the conversation, with many parents making comments such as *'I listen when she wants to talk'*.

Regardless of circumstance or experience, parents have similar views regarding the support that schools could offer to enable them better to help their children. Parents want information about the curriculum, communicated in a variety of ways to suit their broad range of need. They want clearer and more consistent homework policies, including information on how parents can help, and more structured opportunities for children to access facilities and support at school. Many parents lack confidence about how best to help their child, and worry about their ability to 'keep up' academically with children. There is also a perception that teaching methods have changed beyond recognition since parents were at school themselves, and that any help a parent could offer would be outdated and even contradictory. This is particularly notable when parents talk about subjects such as Maths, ICT and Science.

The majority of parents are open to engaging more with schools and have clear ideas about how this could happen. Parents identify primary to secondary school transition as an important stage and would like to be more involved in the process of supporting their children. In addition to transition activities, parents suggest family activities out of school, school-based social events, family learning and parent support groups. There is strong support for schools making greater use of *'parents skills…bringing them into school'*.

Parents value the support and friendship of peers and would like more informal opportunities to get to know each other and to get to know staff. The parent Community Researchers found that being part of a network of parents was one of the greatest benefits of being involved in the project: *'It's so nice to be in touch with other parents again. It's so easy to think you're the only one…struggling with a teenager. It's good to know that others have been through what you're going through and have come out the other side. And it helps to know you're on the right track with what you're trying to do as a parent.'*

Parents are more likely to engage in structured support or parent groups if they are overtly focused upon helping parents to understand specific needs, including learning, emotional, behavioural and physical needs. They are more likely to engage in learning opportunities at schools if they are overtly focused on having fun, enhancing family relationships and learning skills to better support children.

Enhancing the Learning Experience: the Student Perspective (Chapter 8: p97-110)

Students appreciate and respect teachers who listen, are knowledgeable about their subject and are able to balance quality interactions with pupils and effective behaviour management; *'Understanding; they can make the work fun; they get you involved and you really want to learn, not just the ones who shove a piece of paper on your desk and say work'*.

Students value creative and practical lessons that use a variety of teaching methods and encourage them to learn in different ways; *'The more creative lessons are the best lessons because you can actually get involved in stuff'*. They would like the curriculum and lessons to be tailored more to meet individual needs and interests. A number of students feel that behaviour management is sometimes inconsistent and that staff expectations for what constitutes acceptable behaviour are not always clear; *'It's kind of difficult because there is*

supposed to be just one way of doing it, but different teachers do it different ways. They still use the same type of thing, but they set up the punishments in different ways. One teacher would let you off really easily where another teacher wouldn't'.

Students value homework that has a clear link to class work and the curriculum. There is a perception that sometimes homework is given for the sake of it, not to reinforce or extend learning; *'Sometimes you get those really stupid homeworks where you are told to just finish off colouring in or something….you don't need colouring to go to college or university'.*

Students also feel that homework policies could be more consistently applied. They value homework or study support groups and would like more to be made available. Access to computers and the internet is highlighted as a big issue for many students when completing homework, including both those without IT access at home, and those who have to share with other family members.

Students would like a more diverse range of after-school activities, not just sports or 'catch up' clubs, but also those based around *'having fun'* or *'being creative'*. They would like more involvement in deciding which clubs are offered.

Students see volunteering as a key way in which to bridge the gap between schools and the community, enabling young people to be *'more aware of the world outside school and not take things for granted as much; understand how people live and work'*. It is also seen as an opportunity to develop skills and build aspirations for the future; one way to *'make me feel better about myself'.* Students would like to find out more about opportunities for volunteering, with several comments made such as *'I'd love to volunteer, but I haven't a clue how'.*

Lastly, the majority of young people perceive schools as having only a limited role in providing advice and support with issues or problems, and would choose instead to go to their parents, family or friends, whatever the issue.

Recommendations

The report concludes with a number of recommendations. These draw upon the many suggestions made by parents and students, and bring together elements of wider research and best practice. In brief, the recommendations are:

1) A '**Launch**' in each school of the findings and planned actions resulting from this research, raising awareness both within schools and within the wider school communities as a means of getting all partners 'on board' ready to listen to each other, contribute, believe in and embrace changes in practice.

2) For each school to develop a **Communications Strategy**, which learns from the messages of this research and frames interactions and relationships between all those influencing the outcomes and wellbeing of students. In addition to other content the schools choose to cover, it should include clear strands related to:

- communication with parents and carers
- students as decision-makers and facilitators between home and school

The strategy should address:

- the barriers faced by parents in engaging successfully with schools
- the needs of differing groups of parents
- the role of students with regards to student voice
- the views of staff
- the evolving use of IT, including planning for bridging the IT divide

At the heart of the Communications Strategy would be a Parent/Carer Communication Policy, which should be fit for purpose, user-friendly, accessible and organic.

3) For each school to put in place a **Parent Partnership Programme** as part of the wider Communications Strategy, led by a senior member of staff and ensuring a strategic framework for planning, testing and building parent partnerships. As primary to secondary transition provides a critical opportunity for schools to define the shape of sustainable parental involvement, this could be the best starting point for schools. Suggestions for building bridges between school and parents include:

- Y6/7 transition activities for parents as well as children
- social events for families and school staff to get to know each other better
- family learning opportunities
- parent support groups including peer support
- fundraising events for local charities
- more opportunities for parents to come into school, for example to Sports Days or to celebrate children's achievements
- extending parent forums to include online forums
- making use of parents' skills and expertise, using them as an 'extended workforce'

4) For each school to launch a **'Parents Matter' campaign**, to promote what is known about the importance and impact of parental involvement and active 'at home' talk. In the short term, this could include information leaflets sent home, similar to those used in 'Attendance Matters' campaigns; information on school websites, including links to the research evidence for those parents who want to know more; and high profile but simple messaging in places or events where parents congregate. In the longer term, it means schools being patient, reflective and committed to involving parents as far as possible in their children's schooling and learning. The relationships established as part of the Parent Partnership Programme will be fundamental to creating an atmosphere of trust between schools and parents, in which parents might be empowered and positive attitudes to school and learning are promoted. Further, schools could seek to involve parents more in planning to meet the individual needs of all students, thus creating a two-way flow of information sharing and advice, enabling schools and parents to learn from each other.

5) To develop **careers education** as a fundamental element in raising the aspirations of young people and their parents. Suggestions include:

- building staff confidence to engage young people and their parents in 'futures talk' from Year 7 onwards
- involving parents in the careers interviews held for their children
- careers events targeted at parents and their children
- more accessible careers information for young people to share with their parents
- improved opportunities for young people to learn from employers and working role models
- opportunities for young people to engage in local voluntary work
- schools to consider applying for Careers Mark status

6) For each school to review its **Homework Policy** with a working party including young people from a range of circumstances, to ensure that the views and experiences of all are taken into account. Policy reviews should consider the purpose of homework; the types of homework most useful to students; expectations regarding the setting, collecting and marking of homework; the relationship between homework and rewards / sanctions; accessibility including IT access and availability of support from home; materials and information for parents to enable them better to support their children with homework; and lastly, homework or study support groups.

In addition to the main recommendations, there are many ideas and comments made throughout the report that schools can make use of in self-evaluating and developing policy and practice.