



The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme: From Vision to Best Practice

The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme, (HSCL), was established in the Autumn of 1990. The underlying policy of the scheme is one that seeks to promote partnership between parents and teachers. The purpose of this partnership is to enhance pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention in the education system. In addition, the HSCL Scheme places great emphasis on collaboration with the local community. The HSCL Scheme is the pioneer in involving the school in the life of the community and involving the community and its agencies in the life of the school. The Local Education Committee of the HSCL Scheme is central to this process of involvement. The HSCL Scheme has evolved, both theoretically and practically, over the years. Theory has informed practice and practice in turn has informed the theory. With regard to the theory and philosophy of the HSCL Scheme, there are many important stages. The *five aims* were established in the Department of Education and Skills during the summer of 1990. In 2003 these aims were renamed *goals*, in line with the development of the department's strategic policy, though the substance was not altered in any way. The second stage soon followed, which involved the development of twelve *basic principles* devised within the department in 1990. These principles controlled the evolution of the scheme from 1990 to 1993, and there was little modification in their formulation until they were finally published for schools in 1993. An examination of the goals and basic principles reveals the philosophy and points to significant stages in the practical development of the HSCL Scheme.

The five goals of the HSCL Scheme focus on

- supporting marginalised pupils
- promoting co-operation between home, school, and community
- empowering parents
- retaining young people in the education system
- disseminating best practice.

Educational writing, as well as a shared vision based on educational convictions, practical experience in the field, and research evidence, informed the department's thinking.

The twelve basic principles governing the operation of the HSCL Scheme

In the following paragraphs, under each principle a brief explanation is given, and, where appropriate, practical steps for putting these principles into effect are described.

(1) The scheme consists of a partnership and collaboration of the complementary skills of parents and teachers

Partnership, as a central concept in the HSCL Scheme, is a theme at in-service courses for all coordinators. Partnership, as a way of working, is challenging. It calls for changes in individual and corporate attitudes, methods of work, and structures, particularly on the part of schools.

(2) The scheme is unified and integrated at both the primary and the post-primary level

It is expected that HSCL coordinators will adopt a team approach in schools and that any one family will be served by only one coordinator. In addition, space for parents is shared between the schools in the same catchment area, as are courses and activities for parents, funding, transfer programmes, and the Local Education Committee.

(3) The thrust of the scheme is preventive rather than curative

The HSCL Scheme promotes initiatives that are preventive rather than compensatory or curative. The coordinator works with and fortifies the family so that instances of absenteeism and disruption will be minimised. The emphasis on the preventive nature of the HSCL work has been difficult to implement, because the outcome is, by nature, long-term. Within classroom settings, teachers tend to look for short-term benefits and may not be enthusiastic about more long-term remedies. "The emphasis should be on habilitation rather than rehabilitation, on self-determined change rather than on the cure of some supposed disease."¹ The notion of prevention covers such areas as illiteracy, unemployment, drug misuse, jail, and psychological collapse.

(4) The focus of the scheme is on the adults whose attitudes and behaviour impinge on the lives of children, namely parents and teachers

This basic principle is virtually self-explanatory. The work with adults enables HSCL coordinators to identify the needs of both parents and teachers and indeed those of community personnel as well. This principle may perhaps be viewed as the kernel of the HSCL Scheme, bringing together and involving home, community, and school. Theoretical justification may be found in the words of an English educator who holds that, just as children need healthy and strong bodies, so too they need "healthy and strong supporting communities. To that extent we are in the business of community development, just as we are in the business of child development."

(5) The basis of activities in the scheme is the identification of needs and having those needs met **Identification of needs: Process and outcome**

Almost all initiatives, including courses and classes for parents, are organised as a direct result of a needs identification process, which is organised by the coordinators, both formally and informally. HSCL Scheme activities for parents organised by coordinators can be grouped in four broad categories, and there tends to be a pattern in the participation and involvement of parents. Some parents progress through a sequence, while others enter at a particular stage.

The progression is as follows:

1. Leisure activities are a non-threatening starting point for marginalised parents.
2. Curricular activities enable parents to come closer to their children's learning.
3. Personal development courses take place, including parenting, leadership skills development, and involvement in formal learning.
4. Parents support and become a resource for their own child/children, to coordinators, and to the community.

¹ Welling (1985)

(6) The scheme develops teacher and staff attitudes in the areas of partnership and the whole-school approach

The HSCL Scheme demands new ways of thinking and working, together with new attitudes that challenge approaches and values. Significant clarity has been introduced into the area of parent-teacher-community relationships through

- the theory and practice of partnership
- a whole-school approach.

The HSCL Scheme is built on the concept of partnership between home, community, and the school. This partnership is defined as “a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability”.²

Within the HSCL Scheme we hold that a whole-school approach calls for a broad philosophy; thoughtful leadership; quality of achievement; a strong sense of job satisfaction; and supportive and caring management structures. A whole-school approach is characterised by flexibility, the ability to negotiate, the ability to collaborate, a fine balance between task and maintenance issues, and the capacity to improve quality.

In all aspects of school life the principal plays the central role. The promoting, supporting and sustaining of a whole-school approach depends on the principal, while all staff members play a leading role.

(7) The scheme promotes the fostering of self-help and independence

Coordinator initiatives are focused on parents and teachers, not on children, but they impinge directly and over time on children’s lives. The initiatives are concerned with

- promoting parents’ education, development, growth, and involvement
- the participation of parents in their children’s education, including homework support
- providing a parents’ room and child-care facilities for parents who attend courses in the school
- developing principals’ and teachers’ attitudes towards partnership and a whole-school approach - parents and teachers are encouraged to collaborate in sharing their complementary skills, experience, and knowledge.

These parents pass on their skills to the children by acting as teachers’ aides in the classroom and as support persons in the community. and as support persons in the community. They also help teachers by organising and assisting with activities.

Parents as a resource for children at home, in classrooms, and in the community

Parents are a resource for their own children in the home, for other children in the classroom, and in the wider community.

- At the primary level, parents work with children in the classroom in such areas as reading and paired reading, the novel, art and craft activities, drama, library organisation, Mathematics for Fun, Science for Fun, computer work, and cookery.
- At the post-primary level, parents work with young people in the classroom on such topics as the novel, Mathematics for Fun and Science for Fun, peer pressure, the prevention of substance misuse, and teenage pregnancy.
- A number of parents provide modules to pupils doing the Leaving Certificate Applied in such areas as interviewing technique and relationships in the work-place.
- In addition to helping their own children with homework, many parents are involved in a community-run rota of “homework clubs,” where children who have personal or home difficulties are supported.
- In some situations, teenage mothers come to the school on Saturday morning with their babies, who are cared for in the crèche. This facilitates the mothers in becoming involved in personal development, parenting courses, and Leaving Certificate classes. All these efforts are intended to support the young mother in parenting and to enable her to remain in school.

² Pugh and De’Ath, 1989:

Parents as community leaders and as educational home visitors

Some parents with basic training volunteer to participate in advanced training. These parents then become deeply involved in the community. A group of parents and coordinators monitor this process at the local level. Parents have for some time facilitated parenting and personal development courses for other parents. A further and exciting development is the training of parents as educational home visitors. This practice embodies the principle of delegation, of parents in the role of multiplier, and affords more opportunity to reach the most marginalised families. Parents who have been empowered and affirmed now have the capacity to visit other families and to offer support. Each parent as home visitor

- is equipped with a relevant information pack for the primary or the post-primary school
- gives information about school activities, uniform, book rental schemes, policies on homework, punctuality, school transfer, and good behaviour
- listens to the expectations and concerns of parents, particularly in relation to the transfer to post-primary school.

A number of the home visitors are involved in pre-reading or reading and storytelling in the local health centre, again as voluntary work, while young children await their turn to attend the doctor. These parents would have a good understanding of themselves, of others, and of the school and wider community.

The outcome of advanced training includes

- parent-to-parent contact
- a trained pool of parents providing local leadership and more efficient and effective work at the local community level
- more time for creative work on the part of coordinators, because of the process of delegation
- an increased emphasis on the school in the community, on the forging of local links and the development of the partnership process.

Parents and teachers working together on policy formation

To strengthen links between the home and the school, coordinators work with teachers in

- developing a deeper awareness of pupils' and families' circumstances
- promoting the concept of parental involvement in children's learning
- providing opportunities for parent-teacher interaction.

Some teachers continue to explore new ways of working with parents through identifying both their expectations and their concerns for the children. They also involve them in class behaviour and homework codes. An emerging emphasis, since 1996, and one that took almost three years to develop in the HSCL Scheme is that of parents and teachers working together in policy formation. As a result, many of the policies in schools have been developed through parents and teachers working together. In some instances pupils and community personnel have been included in the process.

(8) Home visitation is a crucial element in establishing bonds of trust with families

Home visitation by the HSCL coordinator

The role of the coordinator also includes a systematic approach to home visitation. Home visitation is a purposeful outreach aspect of the HSCL Scheme for parents. It is both a symbolic and a real expression of interest in families, many of which have been alienated from the education system in the past. During the visits, the coordinators

- support parents in the education of their children
- seek to establish a rapport with the parents
- offer information about the services available in the community
- encourage the parents to become involved with the community, to work with community needs and to harness community energy, thereby enabling the community to solve its own problems
- endeavour to show the welcoming, hopeful and human face of the school in the context and circumstances of daily life
- seek out potential parent leaders, who are willing to participate in the HSCL Scheme's activities and to share their talents
- direct the parents towards relevant training
- aim at helping the parents to express their fears about approaching the school
- seek to break down negative attitudes among parents towards schools and schooling.

Coordinators are expected to be sensitive to the needs of the person. They aim to be nonthreatening and friendly. "Encouragement" is the keyword in home visitation. There is a deep awareness that one is there for the good of the family; and coordinators offer support and gently encourage parents into the school. It is vital that HSCL coordinators maintain a positive profile in the home and community in order

- to gain access to homes
- to be respectful of the fact that they have been welcomed into a child's home.

(9) Networking with and promoting the co-ordination of the work of voluntary and statutory agencies increases effectiveness, eliminates duplication, and leads to an integrated delivery of service to marginalised children and their families

Networking

HSCL coordinators liaise with various voluntary and statutory bodies and groups within the community to encourage a cohesive provision of service, in the interest of the pupils. Just as the school is a significant resource for the community it serves, there are also many advantages for the school in drawing from the strengths of the community. The HSCL Scheme's philosophy recognises that the school on its own cannot effect meaningful change but that it can, working collaboratively with other interest groups, minimise the effects of problems associated with educational disadvantage. The links are obvious in relation to the prevention of early school leaving. From its inception the scheme has emphasised the responsibility of coordinators in the area of networking and in directing parents towards existing agents and agencies working in the community. It can be said that an understanding of networking, in theory and in fact, is a first step towards the integrated provision of service to marginalised children and their families.

The integrated delivery of service to marginalised children and families

Pupils are not only members of families and schools, they are also part of community groups, churches, teams, clubs, and gangs. An integrated approach means recognising all the influences at work, aiming to bring coherence to the multiple messages young people receive. Acceptance of the value of the community aspect of the HSCL Scheme has been growing from the mid 1990s. This growth has been accelerated over the past twelve years with the development of Local Education Committees and the general emphasis on the community in the contemporary literature.

How integration takes place

- National coordinators meet and work closely together so that they, and their teams, can deliver the same message at the school and community level; they also support each other's work when visiting schools.
- Within Early Start and the Support Teacher Project, the relevant teachers work with the children while the HSCL coordinator works with the parents.
- A further example is the way HSCL coordinators worked with ESLI and SSRI and are now working with the School Completion Programme, where supportive links have already been forged.

(10) Home, School, Community Liaison is a full-time undertaking

The Department of Education and Skills has made it clear, from the initiation of the HSCL Scheme, that coordinators could not be employed on the day-to-day duties of class and subject teachers. This is to ensure that clear boundaries with regard to areas of responsibility are maintained and that HSCL coordinators remain focused on the adults in children's' lives as well as on fostering community links.

(11) The liaison coordinator is an agent of change

It is recognised that in the partnership model, everyone has a contribution to make. However, the person freed to be a full-time agent of change is the coordinator. To the degree that coordinators have rapport with staff members, receive appropriate in-career development, are able to transfer learning, have a desire to grow in the understanding of the parents they serve, and seek to provide an integrated service at the school and the community level, they can indeed be agents of change within their area of responsibility.

(12) Community "ownership" of the scheme is promoted through the development of the

Local Education Committee

The Local Education Committee

The HSCL coordinators are responsible for the setting up and maintenance of the Local Education Committee. The purpose of the Local Education Committee is to identify school-related issues at the community level that impinge on learning and to address these issues by working collaboratively with other interest groups. Examples of such topics are

- school attendance
- substance misuse
- anti-bullying
- transfer programmes
- homework support
- self-image courses
- health and environmental issues.

Issues identified at the Local Education Committee level often become

- part of the policy-making process between parents, teachers, pupils, and community personnel
- part of the material brought to the homes and explained through parents as home visitors.

In short, the Local Education Committee deals with issues in the community that impinge on learning, in its widest sense. In many instances the same committee serves the needs of HSCL and the management of the School Completion Programme. The obvious integration that takes place with the different education programmes will be dealt with later.

The Local Education Committee is centred on the post-primary school(s) and the relevant feeder primary school(s). The membership is divided equally between school personnel and representatives of voluntary and statutory bodies on the one hand and marginalised but developed parents on the other. Some of the Local Education Committees have included primary and post-primary pupils. The publications of the National Children's Strategy have proved invaluable as a resource and support in this area.

The strength of the Local Education Committee is partnership in action. In the interval between meetings of the Local Education Committee the coordinator regularly meets the "core group" of parents to facilitate the development of committee skills and to enable parents to express their point of view. In fact all coordinators have a core group of involved parents who work with them and support the aims of HSCL. Many members of Local Education Committees have undertaken training together on the development of teams, committee work, partnership, and community development. The present climate of openness, together with the flow of literature, which accepts the mutually interacting roles of community and school, has opened up possibilities for the further development of Local Education Committees. In addition, different geographical areas and different groups of people dictate that there cannot be a uniform solution when it comes to the linking of community and school.

The Department of Education and Skills always emphasises flexibility within the twelve basic principles regarding the role of the coordinator, in order to provide scope for creativity and initiative. Emphasis is placed on the dual role of developing the human and caring aspect of the role, which are the maintenance issues, and providing statistical outcomes, which are task related.