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Relational engagement in practice: Building trust, consistency and community at Humphry Davy School

Context

Humphry Davy School is an 11–16 mixed comprehensive school serving a diverse student population of approximately 770 pupils in Penzance, Cornwall. The school was judged 'Good' across all areas in its most recent Ofsted inspection (2023). The school serves a community with significant socio-economic challenge, with 38% of pupils eligible for free school meals, well above national averages. The locality includes areas of high deprivation (IMD 1), with associated challenges. Around a quarter of students are identified as having SEN, further shaping the complexity of provision and engagement with families.

Penzance is a coastal community where there are structural barriers to engagement, including transport, employment patterns, and limited access to services. These contextual factors contribute to variability in parental engagement, with some families highly engaged and others more 'yet to reach.'

In 2024 the Enys Centre was opened. This is a dedicated health and wellbeing hub on the school site, established in partnership with Duchy Health to provide accessible, early support for students and families, strengthening wellbeing and reducing barriers to engagement with school. A Pyramid of Need analysis indicated that a considerable proportion (over 60%) of students identified within targeted support tiers present with multiple overlapping needs, including attendance concerns, mental health factors, and contextual family challenges. This reinforces the importance of sustained, relational parental engagement. The school engaged with the Parental Engagement Framework (PEF) to support a strategic, consistent and relational way of working with families. This has informed priorities within the School Development Plan, ensuring continued alignment with whole-school culture.

Focus

Humphry Davy School selected principles 3 and 5 of the PEF as priorities for development during 2024–2026. This focus emerged from internal review, stakeholder feedback and longitudinal survey evidence which indicated that, while parental confidence in the school remained broadly positive, communication and engagement required further strengthening.

The school's intention was not simply to increase communication, but to improve its quality—ensuring it was clear, inclusive, responsive, and relational. At the same time, the school sought to deepen connections with the wider community so that families experienced the school as a trusted partner in the education and wellbeing of young people. We believe strongly that this relational, community-connected approach is fundamental to enabling young people to grow and succeed, as it creates a consistent network of support, shared values, and meaningful engagement around each student.

Approach

Principle 3 communication became a whole school cultural priority, embedded within the school improvement plan rather than treated as an additional initiative. This ensured consistency, accountability, and long-term sustainability. Six key approaches shaped this:

- a. *Whole school communication audit and shared ownership.* A structured audit using Kirkland Rowell survey data and parent voice identified strengths and areas for development. All staff engaged with the findings, reinforcing collective responsibility.



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- b. *Embedding continuous feedback and review cycles.* Termly 'pulse checks' and 'You said, we did' style communication in feedback ensured that parental voice informed ongoing improvement and created a bedrock of openness to share good and bad feedback.
- c. *Developing consistent staff practice through training.* These focused on inclusive communication, clarity, accessibility, and tone. Consistency was embedded across the school via weekly 'snappy CPD,' huddles and routines – dynamic responses and input.
- d. *Strengthening coherence and frequency across communication platforms.* Communication systems (newsletter 'Community Matters, Parent Mail, social media, and digital platforms) were aligned to ensure clarity, timeliness, and accessibility, despite being multi-functional platforms designed for separate use.
- e. *Commitment to timely, respectful responses.* We established a clear expectation that parent enquiries are responded to promptly and professionally. This strengthened trust through everyday interactions.
- f. *Promoting openness, integrity, and constructive fallibility.* The school developed a culture of honest communication, acknowledging where improvements are needed. This openness strengthened credibility and trust with families.

Principle 5 Community engagement was also embedded as a whole school priority, recognising that relationships with families are strengthened through shared experiences and visible connection to the local community. Six key approaches shaped this:

- a. *Embedding community engagement within school identity.* Community partnership was deliberately aligned with the school's core values and ethos, ensuring it became a fundamental part of everyday practice rather than an add-on initiative. This approach ensured external collaboration, such as involvement from local health services, youth organisations, and emergency services - as an extension of the school's commitment to student wellbeing, reinforcing a culture of holistic education.
- b. *Formalising and sustaining partnerships.* This included organisations such as Trelya, Whole Again Communities (WAC), Healthy Schools Cornwall and our new Health and Wellbeing Centre 'Enys,' which were strengthened to support enrichment, jointly promoted initiatives and collaboration.
- c. *Increasing consistency and visibility of events (and term dates).* An annual events calendar improved communication and allowed families to plan engagement. Feedback from parents helped to shape the calendar.
- d. *Reducing barriers to participation.* Events were promoted through multiple channels, including accessible and translated formats, with targeted personalise contact for those identified as 'yet to reach.'
- e. *Developing student led community contribution.* Student led initiatives increased visibility of school values and strengthened parental connection. A good example of this was our 'Feel Good Festival' in Summer 2025. This was a school wide wellbeing event open to all students, with parents also warmly invited. This offered the opportunity to engage with a range of professionals and local services focused on supporting both physical and mental health. This is now an annual event led by senior students.
- f. *Build belonging through continuity and shared experience.* Regular and consistent opportunities for engagement supported a stronger sense of belonging. Our 8am to 8pm provision promotes this across weekdays and holidays. The senior leadership team are committed to being visible and accessible every morning and afternoon. Half termly MS Forms to share news that has occurred over the holidays with timely responses back.



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Impact

Parental survey (2026): These responses reflect improved relational trust and responsiveness.

- **88.7%** of parents would recommend the school. **29%** of parents reported that the school had improved over the past year.

Stakeholder feedback and focus groups highlight:

Improved communication experience:

- Parents (and indeed parent governors) report communication as more timely, clearer, and easier to access.
- Greater understanding of school systems and expectations

Stronger relational trust:

- Increased confidence that concerns will be listened to and acted upon, with key people who are accessible and able to respond with decision making clarity.
- Staff seen as more approachable and responsive.

Positive perception of openness and honesty:

- Parents value transparency and acknowledgement of areas for development – we reflect this in our communications and open avenues for further feedback.
- This openness strengthens trust and credibility.

Enhanced sense of belonging and connection:

- Newsletter described as ‘personal’ and ‘insightful.’
- Greater awareness of student experience and school life

Community partnership impact:

- External partners report improved consistency and professionalism.
- Stronger alignment between school values and community work
- Reputational perception in the local community

Wider school impact (attendance, behaviour, intake) Evidence from whole-school monitoring demonstrates wider impact on engagement and school culture:

Attendance

- Whole school attendance is improving from term to term (when compared to the previous year)
 - Autumn 1: **+1.98 improvement**
 - Autumn 2: **+1.20 improvement**
- Persistent absence (below 90%) Significantly reduced year by year:
 - **by 27.9%**
 - Male persistent absence reduced by **35.8%** indicating improved engagement and the impact of targeted intervention strategies.

These improvements indicate a strengthening of school culture, with improved routines, relationships, and engagement. Parental engagement has contributed to this through stronger home school alignment and earlier intervention. An induction for new pupils to embed our expectations and culture has also been a player.



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Behaviour

- Significant reduction in serious behaviour incidents (3-point behaviour) by 32.2%
- Pupils exceeding 50 behaviour points reduced by over 60%.
- Internal truancy reduced through targeted intervention and parental engagement.

Suspensions

- Suspensions were reduced when compared to last year (Feb 26) significantly by 37%.
- Total suspension days were reduced by 42%.
- Repeat suspensions reduced by 75%.

Intake of admissions

- High uptick of first preference (higher than our PAN)
- Increases in mid-year admissions (parents citing HDS culture reputation as a key driver)

Key learning

Engagement with the PEF has strengthened consistency, refined communication and community practice, and ensured parental engagement is fully aligned with whole school priorities. This work highlights that trust is built not through perfection, but through openness and a visible commitment to listen, respond and improve over time.

- **Whole-school culture is critical.** Parental engagement is most effective when embedded across school systems and values.
- **Consistency and continuity build trust.** Regular, predictable communication strengthens parental confidence.
- **Trust is built through everyday interactions.** Timely responses and respectful communication are key drivers of engagement.
- **Openness strengthens credibility and integrity.** Honest communication, including acknowledging areas for improvement, builds trust.
- **Community engagement reinforces relationships.** Visible community connection strengthens parental engagement.
- **Equity remains a challenge.** Engagement varies across groups, requiring targeted strategies.

Next steps

Further strengthen the work on principle 3 communication through:

- Continue the development of digital communication systems (Edulink/Arbor or similar)
- Strengthen expectations around response times and communication consistency.
- Further target engagement strategies for underrepresented groups
- Continue annual impact reporting and “You said, we did” communication.

Focus on Principle 4 Support for learning through expanding parent facing resources to support learning at home.