

Creating a Culture of Strong School, Parents and Community Ties

Arddhendu Shekhar Dash

The holistic development of students is best achieved when schools, parents, and the community collaborate closely. By fostering strong relationships with both the community and parents, schools can offer more learning opportunities, and access valuable resources and local knowledge. Given that children spend significant time with their families and community, schools need to plan regular, structured engagement with parents and the community as a part of school culture for the development of the students.

At the Azim Premji School, Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh, we have been organising engagements with parents and the community to understand the community, build strong relationships, and create a supportive learning environment for our students. In planning these engagements, we have carefully considered the timing when community members would be available to ensure the effectiveness of the engagements. Here are some practices our school has implemented over the past few years to create a positive learning environment. I hope this will help other schools in their engagement with community members.

Orientation of parents

Every parent aspires that their child should get the best education from the school they go to. But in most cases, parents do not know their role in the learning and development of the child. In most families, parents do not spend time with their children to discuss their learning and progress, so their curricular expectations are also not clear. To overcome this challenge, we organise several need-based orientation programmes for parents.

- **Curricular support:** With the parents of children in the Foundational Stage, we discuss the curricular expectations for different grades, the approach to teaching, and how they can support their child at home. After the workshop, we have seen an increase in the number of parents involved in providing academic support to their children, and parents have contacted teachers with queries on homework, etc.
- **Storytelling:** The easiest and most effective way to connect parents and children is through storytelling. We conduct storytelling workshops in which we show parents how gestures, voice modulation, the use of props, and asking



Figure 1. A parents' workshop in progress.

questions at the end of the story can make the process more effective. We also provide a few stories to parents and encourage them to tell these to their children and share their experiences. We tell them how storytelling helps in the development of language skills. After the workshop, parents share videos of their storytelling at home and the videos reflect positive outcomes.

- **Good habits:** There is an orientation programme for all parents on food habits and homework. We discuss the importance of having eggs and milk for good health and nutrition and its impact on children's learning. Despite religious beliefs, most parents generally agree to their children consuming eggs. We also discuss the importance of keeping aside a specific time for their child to study at home and complete their homework. After the workshop, many of the students start dedicating a few hours at home to completing their homework.

Inviting parents and the community to school events

All the events organised at school play an important role in demonstrating the culture of the school, areas of interest of children, and the bond between the school, parents, and the community. The events at our school are all designed to facilitate the active participation of parents and the community, and we invite all of them to participate.

- **Annual Sports Day** is the most eagerly awaited event of our school where children, parents, community and teachers come together and participate in different sports activities. All of them forget their age and roles and play together in a friendly manner and enjoy themselves. This event helps in building good communication and relationships among them, reduces barriers between teachers and the community, and makes parents feel comfortable sharing their views with teachers.
- **Bal Shodh Mela** showcases the school's teaching-learning processes and helps the community understand the importance of its contribution to these processes. In this event, children from different schools work on one or more issues and present their understanding through models, charts, and discussions. It helps them explore and understand the issue and possible solutions and present them to a large audience. Teachers and the community ask children questions and realise that learning is not limited to textbooks. This brings into focus the importance of local knowledge, how learning relates to their real life and different ways of solving problems. Community members feel motivated by seeing the confidence of the children on various issues and the event broadens their understanding of education.



Figure 2. Parents and community members visiting a Bal Shodh Mela at school.

- **National festivals:** We invite parents and all members of the community to participate in all national festivals at school. Children feel enthused to showcase their skills and perform in front of their parents and community, who in turn encourage them.
- **Parent-teacher meetings:** Every quarter, we organise a parent-teacher meeting in which the teachers discuss the learning progress of each student with their parents. They also share some of their observations and how both school and parents can contribute to the learning and development of the child. The teachers also communicate the efforts of the school for the betterment of the students.
- **School community network meeting:** In these meetings, the school shares its overall progress in academics, achievements and the School Improvement Plan (SIP). We discuss the expectations of the community and how the school and the community can work together for the benefit of all children. Since these members are representatives of different communities, they interact with parents regarding issues, such as attendance, and better focus on the learning of identified students. They take ownership of the smooth functioning of the school and also share some expectations of the community, such as children's exposure to skills like sports and music after school.

Organising events in villages

It is important for the school to reach out to the community and find certain platforms to conduct activities and planned interactions with them. These events focus on building awareness of social issues and providing a platform for students to build confidence in performing before large audiences. In our school, some of the performances of students and teachers are meant to create awareness of social issues in the community.

- **Performance by students and teachers:** We have performed *Nukad Nataks* in various villages with messages, such as a clean and healthy society and the harmful effects of using smartphones constantly. The dance and songs in these performances reflect the state's culture and traditions. We also conduct games and drawing activities that encourage all age groups to participate and enjoy. We have seen some old people get emotional during these activities as they recall their childhood. Through these events, the community understands the culture of the school and is happy to associate with it.
- **Community Learning Centre:** Considering the context of our community, one of the challenges we observed was that most of the students are not involved in any academic or constructive



Figure 3. A nukkad natak performance by the students in a village.

activities after school hours. With the help of some influential members of the community, we established a Community Learning Centre in the village where children would get a space to learn and do some creative activities in the evening. The community took ownership of starting the centre and we provided the storybooks and stationery. The children of classes III to VIII gather at the centre for around one and a half hours every evening and complete their homework, listen to stories, and conduct some cultural events. Providing this type of space for children helps in peer learning and encourages the role of community in the development of children.

- **Summer camp at villages:** We know that continuity in the teaching-learning process is important for students. To maintain the continuity of teaching and learning and use the holiday time for creative engagement, we organise summer camps in different villages. With the support of community members, we have identified locations in each village where, with the help of alumni and teachers, we conduct these camps. We work for two hours in the morning with students on maths, language, art, music and physical education and assign projects to them to complete during the holidays. The community appreciates these efforts by the school to support the learning of their children.

Visiting the homes of students

Understanding the community and the socio-cultural and economic conditions of students is crucial for teachers to know their students and helps in creating effective and responsive teaching plans. The teachers visit the homes of students and interact with the parents and other family members to try and understand things like the students' responsibilities at home and factors that impact their learning in school. New teachers who join our school also visit and interact with the community to get an overall understanding of the context from which their students come. This helps not only in building good relationships with parents, the community, and children but also helps in planning lessons.

It is through regular and planned interactions that we established close ties with parents and the community. By making interactions with them a part of our regular work with the students, this mutual respect and support is now an integral part of our school culture.



Arddhendu Shekhar Dash is the Principal of Azim Premji School, Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh. Prior to this, he was a Resource Person at Azim Premji Foundation. He has a master's in mathematics and has been working closely with teachers on maths-related issues. He conducts workshops on conceptual understanding and pedagogical strategies used in teaching maths. He enjoys doing maths with children and is deeply interested in exploring and designing tech resources. He is also engaged in the process of designing the curriculum for Open Distance Learning and writing textbooks for Chhattisgarh. He may be contacted at arddhendu@azimpremjifoundation.org