



Involving Parents through Contracts by Jim Wingate

Parents' interest in their children's schooling is eight times more powerful in improving their children's performance at school than income or social class. How can teachers therefore encourage the interest of parents who are not interested?

In my previous article ("Enhancing Home Support", ELT News 51, Autumn 2004) I recommended ways of encouraging parents to come to school to meet teachers, and ways teachers can reframe parents' negative beliefs and statements. In this article I'm looking at 'contracts'. These can be created by you as an individual teacher or adopted by your whole school.

A. The Teacher's Contracts with the Pupils (this normally takes 40 minutes)

1. A good start is to ask your class what they expect you to do as their teacher. Write their suggestions on the board or on overhead transparency.
2. Discuss each point.
Exactly what do your pupils mean? What are the criteria for success or failure?

For example, my pupils told me "Be on time. Prepare your lessons well. Mark our homework quickly. Be fair in class."

I asked, "Is one minute late OK?" "What is a well-prepared lesson?" "What do you mean by 'quickly'? To give the homework back the next day?" "Please give me examples of being fair and unfair." So we discussed each point until it was clear. The discussion contained lots of useful feedback to help me to teach my pupils better.

3. Say what are your limitations
E.g. "I play tennis on Wednesday evenings. Therefore I can't give back Wednesday's home-

work until Friday." Are you allowed to be ill, or tired? If you don't prepare a lesson well, will they accept an apology?

4. You should end up with a contract with your pupils which you are prepared to accept and sign. By negotiation, items can later be added or changed or dropped.
5. I like to give a signed copy of the contract to each pupil or at least put a copy on the wall in each classroom where I teach them.

B. The Pupils' Contract with the Teacher (this normally takes 40 minutes)

1. A week later ask your class what items they would put in their contract with you, i.e. what they feel they should do as pupils. Write their suggestions, however wild, on the board or overhead.
2. Discuss each point.
Some points may need to be divided into sub-points for clarity, e.g. "We should do our homework" doesn't refer to quality or quantity or presentation or punctuality or even handing it in. By asking "What exactly do you mean?" and saying, "Please give me examples" you can, usually, elicit the detail and clarity. Don't take over the process!
3. Invite your pupils to say what their limitations are, e.g. are they allowed to be ill or tired? What excuses are valid for not doing homework? What excuses are not valid?

Here is an opportunity to revise your contract in relation to theirs. For example, if you agree to set the Tuesday's homework on Mondays, your pupils have two days to complete it and can fit it around their other commitments.

4. Your pupils should end up with a contract which they are prepared to accept and sign (by negotiation items can later be added, changed or dropped).



5. Each pupil should receive a signed copy of the contract and a copy should be placed next to your contract in each classroom where you teach that class.

C. The Parents' Contract with the Teacher (or the school) 30 minutes each if 2 lessons.

1. A week later ask your pupils (e.g. as homework) to show their parents/guardians/carers the two contracts and to discuss with their parents/ etc .what items might go in a parents' contract with you, the teacher.
2. In a following lesson write the suggestions on the board or overhead transparency.
3. Discuss each point. Obviously the parents/etc are not present to argue their points, so ask your pupils what they think their parents/etc would say.

Show sympathy with the parents/etc. For example, a twenty point contract would be difficult to keep to and to remember and some parents wouldn't want to agree with some points. Therefore try to arrive at a very simple contract, e.g. with 3 items which your pupils feel all their parents could agree on.

4. You should end up with a draft contract for your pupils to take home and discuss with their parents/etc. The pupils should encourage their parents/etc to say what their limitations are.
5. A second discussion (this is a great opportunity to teach and/or practise reported speech.) Now, the aim is to arrive at a simple, final contract which all the parents/etc can agree on.

I find the process of simplification is helped by removing from the parent-teacher contract items which are more appropriate in a contract between each pupil and his or her parents/etc, but rightly point out that such a contract is none of your business.

For example, for the parents/etc contract with

you "I will encourage my child to do his or her homework" is a reasonable item for all parents to agree. However, the 'hows' of encouraging may be too varied to put in that contract, and would be more appropriate in a contract between the pupil and his/her parents/etc.

6. Your pupils should end up with a contract for their parents/etc. to sign and there should be a copy of each signed contract to return to you, and a copy for each classroom.

D. Using the Contracts

1. When meeting parents/etc it's useful to have the three contracts in hand to focus on and discuss. Many problems can be expressed as a breach of one or more items in one or more of the contracts. Many solutions can be found quickly and efficiently by discussing how an item in a contract can be better fulfilled and noting action points e.g. "I, as teacher agree to remind x to tell you (parents) that he/she has homework." "You as parents/etc agree to help x to make the time and space to do the homework and to show interest." "x, as pupil, agrees to tell x's parents/ etc about each homework and to give them an opportunity to help to create time and space and to show interest."

Each person should have a written note of all the action points to be done by themselves and by the other parties.

Monitoring the solution is therefore simply reporting on the action points.

2. When you have problems with pupils, you can discuss your and their contracts (and their parents' etc contract) and negotiate action points as in D.1. above.
3. When a pupil has problems with you, you can discuss contracts. You can ask 'How can I work better with you?' and negotiate an individual contract (e.g. with one or two items) with that pupil. For example, "I, as teacher agree not to fire



surprise questions at you. I agree to give you a 'second chance' to revise poor work and present it again." I, as pupil, agree to try out new strategies to help me be more calm under stress and to report on which strategies I'm using and how well they are working."

4. For the Whole School

Many schools in Britain present the parents/etc of new pupils with the standard contracts, the teachers', the pupils', the parents' and ask them to sign them at a discussion meeting at the start of their pupil's school career.

Professional profile:

Jim Wingate's latest book is „*How to Be an Amazing Teacher*“, a home study course - see www.jimwingate.co.uk. Jim has been speaker at 3 more international conferences this year. To have Jim tell stories to your pupils in your school contact jen_llywelyn@yahoo.co.uk.

