

SEC Consultant of the Month – February 2008 – Clio Whittaker

Clio Whittaker recently joined the SEC. Here she explains her journey from being a chair of governors to becoming a consultant working with parents and schools to improve

Hardly a day goes by now without the government urging schools to engage with parents more. The reasons are obvious: every teacher knows - and there is plenty of research to show - that what happens to children at home has a significant impact on their progress and achievement at school. However, there are real problems with schools taking on responsibility for supporting parents. Most importantly, teachers are already extremely busy people and their training and experience is in working with children, not adults. Clio Whittaker believes that, rather than giving teachers another job that they don't really want and are not qualified for, schools should use professional expertise to develop services and support for parents.

After ten years as chair of governors of a primary school and five years as one of the first Parent Governor Representatives on Camden Council, London, Clio decided she should do more than just argue that schools should provide support for parents. So she trained as a family learning teacher and has subsequently worked for The Parent House in King's Cross and in many primary schools in Camden, Islington and Tower Hamlets. She has developed innovative courses and workshops for parents, many of whom are from immigrant communities. Through participating in family learning, parents come to understand schools' expectations of them and their children, and learn practical, effective and fun things to do at home.

'One of the most rewarding aspects of my work is that, even in just a short time, you can see that you are really making a difference to someone's life. The reason is that parents have that essential ingredient for learning – motivation. I have never yet met a mum or dad who didn't want to be a good parent to their children; however, a lot of people seem to lack confidence in their ability as parents. Much of what I do is about helping parents find that they actually can be good parents, that they can support their children's learning and that their children love it when they spend time doing things together.'

In her work in a key area where schools and parents are used to collaborating – reading – Clio draws on her experiences of training and supporting volunteers for a national charity. She is particularly interested in encouraging families to make the most of books through games and creative activities. She believes strongly that a parent's role in helping children learn to read is not about doing more school-type work at home, but about igniting children's interest through making reading meaningful. In 2008, in a new initiative called Parent School, Clio will deliver sessions to parents directly and will share the resources she has developed with schools by providing training for staff such as learning mentors and home-school liaison workers.