



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

# Building our communities

## Family science learning at Balivanich School

By Katie Macleod

**Families gathering around the kitchen table to conduct science experiments might not be what immediately comes to mind when you think of homework, but homework has looked a bit different for pupils at Sgoil Bhaile a' Mhanaich in Benbecula recently, and it's all thanks to the school's family learning programme.**

Each year the school issues a Parental Engagement Calendar for parents and carers of pupils, providing an overview of ways in which they can get involved in their children's learning – and this year's Primary 4 "Science Bag" homework kits are a result of just that, as they were originally introduced after parental feedback and then trialled at a family workshop.

"We were looking to engage parents and carers in their children's learning, and make it more meaningful for them, so it's not just a case of coming to parents evening and things like that. We created a parental engagement calendar, which provides them with an overview of ways in which they can be involved in their child's learning," explains Depute Head Teacher Kirsty Brennan. "We've got an open-door policy where parents are encouraged to come into the school and take part in family and parental workshops. This is complemented by a variety of different events throughout the year."

First introduced in 2017, the family engagement calendar changes each year depending on the School Improvement Projects – this year the focus is on raising attainment in literacy and numeracy – and Science Kits for homework are just one of many initiatives taking place during the 2019-

2020 school year.

Other home learning activities which encourage parental engagement have included Maths Home Learning Kits and Topic Homework Grids, and at the end of each term pupils take home Criomagán or "Snapshot" Jotters, which highlight the learning taking place in school and offer parents and other family members the opportunities to comment on the child's work. Nursery children also have family books which are updated in partnership with parents and carers and shared on a regular basis.

Pupils are not only taking learning home, but parents are going to the school to "learn" too. February saw the first Digital Learning Parental Workshop, which gave an overview of apps and resources that can be used to enhance learning, and the school offers a Cafe Drop-In session which brings parents and carers into the school on a weekly basis, and focuses on different aspects of learning in another informal environment. Over the course of the school year so far they've practised phrases in British Sign Language; learned about Emerging Literacy; and heard advice from a Speech and Language Therapist. Similar opportunities are available for nursery parents; the "Stay and Play" Sessions allow parents to sit in on nursery sessions and cover a range of themes that support a child's learning and engagement.

Families whose first language is not English are also supported through the family engagement programme, with parents visiting the school to discuss resources that support both their child's English language acquisition as well as their own. One parent who attended an English as an Additional Language (EAL) class reported that watching how the teaching and learning was carried out in the classroom not only helped them understand what their child was finding difficult,



but allowed them to support their child at home in the same way, too.

Staff at Sgoil Bhaile a' Mhanaich also work with the community and local organisations in their parental outreach. Ceolas, for example, have been providing community Gaelic classes alongside the school's own Sradagan sessions after school, where parents of children who attend Sradagan (Gaelic Medium Education nursery) can come along and take part in Gaelic classes themselves.

Then there are all the regular school fundraisers and events, like Family Quiz Nights, Bingo, Fun Runs, and Sports Day. Digital newsletters and the school's social media accounts also help keep parents, carers, and relatives and the community up to date with what's happening within the school,

whether that's pupils dressing up as their favourite story character for World Book Day, or videos of students trying out new numeracy strategies.

This type of family engagement in the life of the school has benefits that go beyond individual homework assessments or fundraising efforts: Education Scotland, the Scottish Government agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education, notes that parental engagement in a child's learning is a "key driver" in "achieving excellence and equity in Scottish education. The engagement of parents and families can help raise attainment for all and help to ensure that every child has an equal chance of success."

In that vein, Sgoil Bhaile a' Mhanaich involves parents in general curriculum development as well as specific learning activities. Each year, parents are invited to the school to discuss the school improvement projects, with many of their ideas and suggestions being taken on board. Families also have input into the curriculum design, particularly when it comes to the Interdisciplinary Learning Themes, topics which use links across different subjects to enhance learning.

"It's about engaging with the community and our families, asking what their needs are and what they'd like to see and be involved in with regards to school life," says Kirsty. "Research has shown that when parents are involved in their children's learning, it does have a positive effect on pupils' learning."

As for the science homework kits, they've gone down as well with parents as they have with pupils. In the words of one parent: "we all really enjoyed doing the science experiments as a family – they taught us all a thing or two!"