

How to Engage Parents

- and How to Evaluate that Engagement

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Families Matter – A resource for parents and families working in partnership with schools to support the well-being of young people

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Introduction

I have been asked to talk about the peak parent organisations' (ACSSO and APC) experience in the engagement of parents and the measuring of that engagement particularly through the Families Matter element of the MindMatters suite of programs.

The future funding of Families Matter is uncertain, so I am pleased to have at least this opportunity to talk about our concepts of parent engagement and the outcomes.

A large part of the work of our organisations is concerned with research into the 'how' and 'why' of parent engagement with their children's schools and looking for ways to promote real partnership between families and schools and teachers and parents.

Successive Australian Governments have supported our work. Just in the last month or so, the Minister for Education, Science and Training approved a new category for the 2007 National Awards for Quality Schooling - Excellence in Family-School Partnerships.

Part of the rationale for that award says that; *“Working together, families and schools help students maximise their personal, social, academic and vocational development now and in the future”*

ACSSO and APC work is underpinned by that belief. This working together includes the engagement of parents as a group - a phalanx of support – if you like, - for improving schooling outcomes for students and building the school community.

School Culture and Parent Engagement

The culture of schools, particularly secondary schools, does not often see parents and families as having a role to play in the school education of their children.

The real and perceived barriers to parent engagement are well documented. We hear from schools and teachers that parents will not come, parents are not interested, older students do not want their parents around, parents make too many demands, and the school has all the experts. Teacher training does little to encourage an understanding of the strategies for and benefits of broad parent engagement.

From parents, we hear that schools are not welcoming, do not value the information parents have to impart about their children, do not share information about school and school goals and only contact them when something goes wrong.

These perceptions and their effects can be challenged and overcome. If schools are to educate the whole child and provide them with the skills necessary for 21st Century living, school cultures need to change to a parent and family inclusive ethos especially now that the work of schools has broadened to include in the curriculum matters such as values, safety, citizenship, drug education, and health and well being.

These are issues where parents have a role to play and influence to exert. These are still the province of home and it is clear that congruence between what happens at home and at school necessarily leads to a greater sense of belonging and connectedness for students and their better assimilation of what is taught in the school.

Families Matter Grounded in Research

Families Matter is a process for parent engagement with schools with an accompanying program which explores the general underlying principles of health and well being. The resource is aimed at enabling parents to appreciate the elements of resilience and encourage these in their children in co-operation with the schools' goals in this area.

The process and the program draws on our research at three levels as to what works best in parent engagement and in fostering an ongoing family/school partnership.

- Firstly: the general research over the last thirty or forty years, conducted in many countries which shows that when parents and family members become participants in children's education, there are profound and comprehensive benefits for students, families and schools.
- The second aspect of research was conducted in 2002 by ACSSO and APC when we asked focus groups of parents around Australia about a proposed resilience building resource.

They told us they wanted a process that would not be characterised by principals and teachers talking down to parents on a deficit model – many parents felt that principals and teachers are intimidating and authoritarian in their approach.

They said that they wanted a program which provided opportunity and encouragement for parents talking and working with other parents, sharing their experiences – in effect, engaging in a process of significant dialogue about 'how do you cope with life; and how do you help and support your children to develop positive coping skills'.

They said that there should be access to such a program in primary school because they would be keen to develop awareness and coping skills in preparation for their children's adolescent years. They also said that primary school children and the schools themselves are more encouraging of their involvement.

- The third aspect of research comes from learnings from the iterative process undertaken in the roll out of Families Matter over the past 18 months to 2 years

Learnings

Learning 1. One of the principal learnings about the 'how to' of the engagement of parents is that the school culture should have ongoing processes which welcome parents and provide a mutually respectful forum for their engagement.

Ongoing and embedded processes are needed because of the annual exit and entry of staff students and parents. New entrants need to be drawn in to a culture that appreciates, values and welcomes parents. Strategies to make this a reality require continuous effort and some resourcing.

Learning 2 was that parents want a discussion not a lecture.

So we developed a resource to be delivered by trained parents to their parent peers in association with a staff member.

In the roll out of the resource to schools, schools self-selected by registering an expression of interest in response to our invitation to participate.

Schools then appointed parents and/or staff members who attended a training day in the presentation and content of the program.

Learning 3 was that school leaders need to support the process and the concept and accept parents as presenters and discussion leaders.

Then parents present to their parent peers and sufficient time is allowed for parents to participate in the activities and discuss the concepts as applied to their own experience of coping and parenting.

Transferable Process

Learning 4 is that the Families Matter process is transferable and capable of use with appropriate parent resources on a range of topics.

It has been used successfully in other settings. *Successful Learning in the Early years of Schooling; the Indigenous parent Factor* is one current example. Indigenous parents are trained to present literacy learning material to their communities. Workshops and training for this APC program, are in progress across all states and territories due to the demand from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and educational bodies within the State, Catholic and Independent sectors.

Learning 5 is that the broad engagement of parents in school projects and goals for student learning develops partnership between Families and Schools. This emerges from Families Matter but also from the recent evaluation of the Family/School Partnership Framework Project, funded by the Department of Education, Science & Training (DEST).

That project involved 61 government and non-government schools across Australia trialling a family/school partnership project chosen by the school and supported with funding of \$10,000 for each school. Each school's project was underpinned by the principles and strategies for parent involvement set out in the framework document. The Framework itself was developed as a draft in 2005 with the input of principals, teachers, other educators and parents from across Australia.

Some of the 61 schools in the project chose Families Matter as their project for the development of partnership.

Preliminary finding from the consultants engaged to conduct the Family/School Partnership project concluded that partnerships between families and schools can:

- ***Improve educational outcomes for students,***
- ***Positively alter school culture,***

- *Stimulate self-growth among parents,*
- *Contribute to the building of social capital in the community,*
- *Enhance the professional rewards for principals and school staff,*

A survey of parents conducted as part of the study found that large majorities said that their involvement in their school's partnership project had:

- Led to their knowing more about the kinds of activities going on in the school generally (60%);
- Led to their knowing more about what their children were being taught in school (62%), and
- Been good for their children's education (69%).

Measuring effects

The quantitative and qualitative evaluation, although conducted in a very limited time frame in the 4th term of 2005, plus supplementary work in early 2006, does provide some strong indicators of effect on schools, students and parents.

For the qualitative aspects of the evaluation, the consultants interviewed a wide range of stakeholders. Consultants attended trainings in three jurisdictions and interviewed trainers, then visited a number of schools.

Learning 6 then is that *“the parent to parent nature of Families Matter has created a perception among principals that it is a way of getting parents involved in the school, something they find it very difficult to do, and it is this quality that is most important to principals.”*

Learning 7 is that *“the Families Matter resource gives parents a means of coming together and discussing issues about the raising and educating of children in a way that adds to their own coping and parenting skills. It does this by allowing parents to decide what it is they want to talk about, and how they want to talk about it and creates a vehicle for partnerships between families and schools. The principals and school staff in schools using the resource have said they highly value it for this quality.”*

For the quantitative research aspects, the consultants surveyed 177 deliverers of the program and a detailed analysis of these interviews is contained in the report.

Learning 8 is that Families Matter gives some parents, both presenters and participants, new self-confidence and contributes to their personal development.

Learning 9 is that Families Matter supports the capacity of the parent/staff team to carry their school's partnership building strategies further in line with the parents' feedback.

Quoting from the report *“An important additional finding from the “experienced” schools was that while the original Families Matter session had provided the impetus for the parent body to come together in the first place to talk about resilience and related issues, the format of subsequent sessions tended to vary according to the wants of the parents”.*

The Future

The report recommends that the project be continued for a further three years with a concentration on back end support for the embedding of the program within schools. Of course that is not going to happen unless further funding is provided.

But **Learning 10** is that for ongoing usefulness, the integrity of the training and presentation components underpinning Families Matter would need to be continued.

Families Matter calls for the training of parents as presenters of the resource to their parent peers. This has been a successful and essential aspect of the program and from our research, an important part of the attempt to elicit the broader engagement of parents with their children's schools.

The usefulness of Families Matter, should it simply be used by teachers to talk at parents, is questionable. The live element of the concept is the freedom parents feel to draw upon their own experience of resilience and coping in company with their parent peers. Choice of parent presenters from within the school community is most likely to ensure that the context is appropriate and the presenters able to reach the participants.

Finally, [to explore how these important learnings fit with leading international research](#), the Harvard Family Research Program website is well worth visiting by those who see value in the involvement of parents and families in the school education of their children.

Their extensive research since 1980 and the riches of complementary learning research available there underpin the recognition that our schools alone cannot fully meet the learning needs of our children.

We need to consider types of family and parent supports and opportunities that can both complement learning in schools and collectively result in better developmental outcomes.

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25 July 2006

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