

## LAUNCH OF THE FAMILY-SCHOOL & COMMUNITY PARTNERHIPS BUREAU

11 August 2008

### JENNY BRANCH, PRESIDENT (ACSSO)

I want to begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people, the traditional owners and current custodians of the land on which we are meeting.

Today's launch of the Bureau is a particular delight because it represents a significant milestone on what has been basically a ten year journey.

Over the past decade, ACSSO and the Australian Parents Council have worked collaboratively to raise awareness and build an informed understanding of international research findings on the importance of parent engagement in their children's learning.

In 1999, the ***Adelaide Declaration on the Goals of Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***, which was agreed by all state and federal Ministers of Education, declared that parents play a vitally important role in their children's learning and development not only before the years of compulsory schooling, but continuing throughout their education – and beyond.

This theme has now become a major feature of the work of COAG – the Council of Australian Governments under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Rudd. It has been made very clear to government agencies and to NGOs that partnerships with parents are to be a hallmark of policy across the full range of services to families and young people. So, in a very real sense the emergence of the Bureau is extremely timely.

The Bureau has already begun building its links with other agencies, like the Immigration Department and Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. While our focus is very much on supporting schools in the way they engage with families and their communities, we are also alert to the whole-of-government agenda, and will make sure we remain involved at that level.

I want to acknowledge the support of Minister Gillard, and her predecessor Stephen Smith as former Shadow Minister. They have both shown a genuine appreciation of the role of parents and families in ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for young people. I might say that the Bureau, which has been funded for four years, is as far as we know the **ONLY** initiative that has received funding commitment beyond 12 months. That's a measure of how seriously Minister Gillard is taking the work of the Bureau.

Family, school and community partnerships are about people: students, parents, teachers, principals, school support staff and members of the local community. They reach out across ALL parents and families, from

those who are well-resourced and able to readily participate to those who are vulnerable and in need of the greatest support.

We are especially concerned to enable schools to connect with those 30 per cent of parents who experience barriers to their engagement with schools. These barriers range from language and cultural barriers, and social and economic disadvantage, to lack of confidence and a sense of alienation as a result of parents' own unhappy experiences at school. These barriers CAN be overcome if we give parents and schools the support, encouragement and know-how to build partnerships.

My colleague Caz Bosch will talk to you in a little more detail about family-school partnerships at a national level, and what we are already doing to support them.

The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau has been established:

- to help seed, grow and nurture partnerships,
- to provide constructive and meaningful support to those who seek to build better relationships around education,
- to inform all interested parties about best practice in family-school partnerships, and
- to harness the potential for community-based partnerships to lead to improved educational outcomes for our nation's most valuable asset: our young people.

The Bureau has a number of specific deliverables.

It will build upon and deepen the research base about the importance of family-school partnerships, and in particular about what works best when it comes to developing partnerships and enabling them to be sustainable over the long term.

The Bureau will be conducting action research in collaboration with schools already involved in or keen to develop partnerships. The results will be documented and disseminated. We will communicate the results and advice through the Bureau's own website and helpdesk, through journals and magazines and newsletters – and of course through parent organisations. We are also video-documenting schools' activities, so that we can share the insights and stories of those who are actually walking the talk.

Maintaining linkages with the action-research schools will also be an important area of activity on which documentation and policy development can be based. These evolving case studies will provide other schools with documented research through which to learn, replicate and adapt strategies to meet their own community context and circumstances.

One of the vital functions of this Bureau will be to feed parent insights into education research and policy development, and make available evidence about parent views, needs and priorities in the education of their children.

Annual parent surveys will provide a significant picture of parental attitudes towards key education and social issues, relevant to relationships between families and their schools.

The Bureau is also establishing, along with its website, a 24/7 online support and advice service. Parents and teachers and principals can log on and send in their questions and suggestions. These will be referred to expert panels who will be able to provide advice in language that people can understand. The helpdesk will also provide a valuable source of information to the Bureau about parents' interests and concerns, which will in turn guide the sorts of activities and research that the Bureau might undertake.

We have great plans for the Bureau. We are delighted with the strong support we have received from the Minister and from DEEWR. So I guess I am putting everyone on notice that we are here for the long haul. I look forward to that sort of ongoing commitment from the government and from the affiliates of both ACSSO and APC.

We know that parental engagement is fundamental to the success of our young people in schools. Families are the first and continuing educators of their children, and we want to ensure that families can play that role effectively.

And on that note it's time for me to introduce to you my colleague, the President of APC, Caz Bosch, who will tell you a little more about family-school partnerships and their advancement at the national level.

Thank you all very much for helping us celebrate this significant occasion.