

# **“FAMILIES MATTER”: WORKING AS PARTNERS**

**A paper to the Tasmanian P & F Conference in Launceston**

on

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by

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*“Partnership is a process, since it involves learning to work together and valuing each partner’s positive contribution to the relationship”*

*OECD, Paris (1997) ‘Les parents partenaires de l’école’*

***Families Matter – a resource for families and schools working in partnership to support the well-being of young people.***

## FAMILIES MATTER: WORKING AS PARTNERS

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The national “Families Matter” initiative has been developed to recognise that parents, carers and families are essential partners in all aspects of their children’s learning and personal development.

As with every aspect of ACSSO’s operations, it reflects the extent to which research around the world clearly shows that children’s learning outcomes, health and well-being are improved when parents, families and schools work closely together.

“Families Matter” recognises that strong positive support and understanding from families is vital to the development of children’s and young people’s confidence and self-esteem, their sense of a purpose and meaning in their lives, and a positive attitude to learning.

It provides a resource for families and schools **working in an effective and productive partnership** to support the well-being of young people..

Much has been written by researchers and educators in recent years, to emphasise the strategic advantages of families, schools and their communities developing sustainable partnerships. This suggests that *“parental involvement seems like the least controversial concept in education reform – just try and find someone who admits to being against it”* (quoted in McConchie 2004, p.1).

However, Rob McConchie’s Issues Paper of 2004 cites a range of research which emphasises that, however desirable it is to operate in an effective parent-school partnership arrangement for the benefit of all students, this desired state of things does not just happen all by itself. The research demonstrates there are various issues which operate as barriers to limit or block and exclude the informed and willing engagement of many principals and educators. There are also issues which operate as barriers to limit or block and exclude the informed and willing engagement of many parents and families.

These issues and concerns are also highlighted by Professor Andy Hargreaves in his paper “Professionals and Parents: A Social Movement for Educational Change” (Hargreaves 1999). While noting both the research and the rhetoric which supports the need for families and educators to work in effective partnerships, he recognises that “the more pervasive reality is often very different.”

Hargreaves notes that teachers experience more anxiety about their relationships with parents than about almost any other aspects of their work. His analysis of the problems in establishing strong partnerships between teachers and parents shows the extent to which parents and educators are interpreting and coming at the issues from very different perspectives and motivations, which can put them on collision course.

To work through these blocking factors and achieve productive and sustainable partnerships requires considerable commitment and goodwill from parents, families and educators. As noted by the OECD, this is *a learning process*. It takes time and effort. But the results clearly demonstrate this is worth it.

In a symposium paper of December 2004, US researcher Karen Mapp (Mapp 2004) confirms there is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and improved results in academic achievement and also in relation to health and well-being.

These benefits are demonstrated consistently across families irrespective of their economic circumstances or their ethnic or educational backgrounds. Nor it is just a primary school phenomenon: the positive effects are also evident in high school – where family involvement is in fact more important than any other time in their lives, there being so many other things happening to them and happening around them.

The research shows there are two main aspects of family-school partnerships:

- Where what happens in the home supports and reinforces the importance of academic and personal development with a shared understanding with the school of what is important – home learnings and home values are fully consistent with and supportive of school objectives.
- Families go the next step and become directly involved in provision and operation of school resources and programs to improve teaching and learning opportunities in the school and its extra-curricular activities.

In a recent paper Dr Rollande Deslandes from Canada explores the Quebec “Vision of home-school partnership” – an excellent paper from which is drawn much of the discussion that follows through the rest of this present paper (Deslandes 2001).

Deslandes establishes essential criteria for an effective partnership. Such partnership must necessarily be:

- based on mutual trust, common goals and open two-way communication
- with the capacity and purpose to involve the parents who are difficult to reach and those you want to see who never seem to come into the school
- recognise that students are active agents in family-school relations.

Deslandes notes a variety of research which indicates that “parents decide to participate when

- they understand that **collaboration is part of their role as parents**
- they **believe they can positively influence** their child’s education; and
- they perceive that the **child** and the **school wish** them to be involved.”

These are extremely important points, which it is useful to consider in more detail – for the full range and depth of discussion see the Deslandes paper itself:

### **1. Construction of the Parental Role**

How parents see their role is of major importance because it determines what activities parents see as appropriate and necessary they should get involved with. It is driven by their views on child development, child-rearing and what constitutes appropriate kinds and levels of home support. For example, parents are unlikely to become involved if they believe teaching should be left solely to teachers, or that adolescents can be left to work things out by themselves. Parents’ perceptions are also shaped by their early contacts with schools - if parents’ experiences from their first contacts with schools indicate that schools expect little parent involvement, parents will be less inclined to expect to participate.

Because children notoriously do not come with an “Instruction Kit”, parents develop beliefs and understandings on parental role expectations from their contacts with particular groups in the community. These groups include: their own wider family; church; school itself; social organisations; and so on. The views parents thus form about their role in the development and rearing of children and how home support should operate, will influence their decision on the extent to which and ways in which they will seek participate in their children’s education.

## 2. Parents' sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school

As noted by Rob McConchie (McConchie 2004), a significant barrier lies in parents not being aware of the applicability of the research findings and the demonstrable benefits for students of parent participation; or in their feeling that they may have little to offer.

Research noted by Deslandes also shows that parents' behaviour is influenced by their estimate of their abilities and capacity to contribute in a given situation. Parents with a strong and informed sense of their ability to contribute will be more likely to participate in their children's education, since they believe that this will benefit their children's educational outcomes, their personal development and their well-being.

It is therefore important to recognise that many parents may have less confidence in their ability to participate effectively to support their children's development. These groups may include parents with a more limited level of educational achievement themselves; parents from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds; and parents with students at secondary level. These parents and families may need higher levels of information which provides support and encouragement. The belief that they are capable of helping their child succeed, and an informed understanding of the ways they can provide support, greatly increases the probability of their positive involvement.

## 3. Invitations and opportunities for parental involvement

Deslandes points out the fundamental question here is: *Do parents perceive that the child and the school want them to be involved?* The way parents respond to this question is likely to be based on:

- the child's affirmation of the importance of parent involvement;
- a school climate that is inviting; and
- teacher attitudes and behaviours that are warm and welcoming

## Conclusion

Deslandes emphasises the clear messages of the research: "that the level of school performance appears to be linked to high parental involvement. Accordingly, adolescents who succeed well and have high aspirations say they receive more emotional support from their parents than do others." That emotional support is noted to include such elements as: encouragement, congratulations, discussions, etc. (Deslandes 2001) Positive, supportive interaction and communication. These messages drive "Families Matter".

The design, purpose and operation of "Families Matter" clearly recognise and address the three elements which underpin parents' informed participation:-

- helping parents to understand that collaboration is part of their role as parents
- informing and reinforcing their belief they can positively influence their child's education; and
- contributing to their perception that the child and the school wish them to be involved."

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"Families Matter" is a **'resource for parents and families working in partnership with schools to support the well-being of young people'**. It is a process – a conversation process – rather than a product or a program. The conversation process – and the ways in which the resource is used to support the conversation – is intended to be flexible and adaptable to the context and needs of each community.

“Families Matter” seeks to strengthen community links: and to develop a strong, sustainable partnership with the school around the issues of student social and emotional health and well-being. It recognises Deslandes’ essential criteria for effective partnerships, which must necessarily be:

- based on mutual trust, common goals and open two-way communication
- with the capacity and purpose to involve the parents who are difficult to reach and those you want to see who never seem to come into the school; and
- recognise that students are active agents in family-school relations.

For some parents and families, and for some educators, such a partner relationship involves a major change, even a cultural revolution. Deslandes quotes a Quebec education authority statement that: “we believe partnership to be a path to the future that requires a complete change in our ways of thinking and acting; and that is a change our policy makers heartily endorse.”

It is no surprise, however, that he and others point to research which emphasizes that building a genuine partnership takes time.

Simplistic assumptions that such cultural revolutions can be achieved overnight by elegant policy statements and executive commands (Change NOW!) build unfulfillable expectations that lead only to disappointment and frustration – the approach which Seymour Sarason called “The predictable failure of educational reform” (Sarason 1990).

As with “Families Matter”, Sarason recognised there is a need for change at the level of the values, attitudes and behaviours which underpin existing structures and authority relationships: “if there aren’t fundamental shifts in how people think and interact, as well as in how they explore new ideas, then all the reorganising, fads and strategies in the world won’t add up to much” (discussion in Senge et al, 2000 at p.20)

At a recent (May 22, 2005) education conference in Melbourne, Professor Andy Hargreaves noted that there are typically two approaches to educational change. The most popular approach is one he terms “carpet bombing”: put everyone through a quick one-day PD program and confidently announce that the world has been changed. But typically, when the flurry subsides, nothing much has altered.

Processes of sustainable change must necessarily be participative and through “productive conversations” which review fundamental aspects of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and behaviours, with a 3-5 year horizon.

Families Matter is not carpet bombing, not the simplistic or cosmetic quick fix. With Families Matter we have a starting point, a supporting process, a catalyst for real and sustainable change in terms of building partnerships in families, schools and communities, in ways that support the social and emotional health and well-being of young people.

## References:

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