

Engaging With Parents, Families and Community

The Why and How of Effective and Sustainable Partnerships.

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We are seeking to deal with two linked questions here today.

- How do we effectively engage parents, families and communities in ways that build strong, positive, enduring and sustainable partnerships?
- And how can we measure and demonstrate both the extent and benefits of that engagement and the operation of such partnerships?

The central focus and purpose of such partnerships is of course to create an effective, flexible framework of support to the positive personal development of young people: Promoting their total well-being, resilience, social and emotional development. Their sense of self-worth, connectedness, belonging - with a positive outlook and sense of purpose in their lives.

We know very well **WHY** we should strive to establish this level of engagement and partnership. Research around the world over the past twenty years in particular emphasises the overwhelmingly positive benefits of families, schools and communities working together with a shared understanding and focus on the needs of young people.

- In 2004, Professor Geoff Masters reviewed the research to distil the factors which underpin a “good school”. He sought to identify the “characteristics of outstanding schools”. This suggested that highly effective schools – schools that achieve high standards regardless of gender, family background or socioeconomic status, have a number of features in common. One of these is a high level of parent, family and community involvement. In these schools, parents and families are encouraged “to take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting their children’s learning. Parents are involved in setting goals for the school and in developing school policies.”
- In a presentation to the 2004 Harvard University Family, School and Community Connections Symposium, researcher Karen Mapp noted: “We found when we looked at this research that there is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and better physical as well as improved academic achievement. This relationship rolls across families of all economic levels, racial, ethnic and educational backgrounds. And for students of all ages. This is not just a primary school phenomenon. We see that when parents of middle schoolers and of high schoolers are involved in education, there are positive effects.”
- The Harvard Family Project research demonstrates two closely interlinked key aspects of family-school partnerships, where:
 - Family situation in the home supports and reinforces the importance of academic and personal learning and development and there is a mutual understanding of what is important, and a shared focus and commitment to the personal and academic development of the student. Home values and home learnings are fully consistent with and supportive of school learnings and objectives.
 - Families go the next step and become directly involved in provision and operation of school resources and programs to improve teaching, curriculum and extra-curricular activities. This is consistent with the findings of Geoff Masters noted above. When family and community are engaged in these partnerships, research indicates that “macro” level improvements and positive impacts are achieved in school system operations and effectiveness.

- A study by Professor Kevin Marjoribanks, head of the University of Adelaide's Graduate School of Education indicates that if schools are going to help overcome educational inequalities they have to form strong and meaningful partnerships with parents from all social backgrounds. They have to develop that partnership from two points of view:
 - (1) what parents do educationally for the child inside the family; and
 - (2) how the family relates to the school.

Schools need to develop supportive interactions with families, with special efforts being made for those parents who find it difficult to engage with schools. In his overview comments to his research Kevin Marjoribanks sets out the broad proposition thus:

“It is generally agreed that if parents are involved positively in activities associated with children’s learning then the school outcomes for their children are likely to be enhanced. As a result, education practices that address inequalities in school attainments are designed more and more to involve parents in the learning experiences of their children, at home and at school... (and) ...teachers are being encouraged or directed to recognise the importance of parents as partners. It is an expectation that such partnerships will be associated with the formation of more enriched learning environments, which in turn will be related to more positive school attitudes and associated with improvements in children’s academic performance.” (Marjoribanks 2002, p.1)

- Extensive data analysis and research synthesis by Professor John Hattie of NZ over many years, demonstrates that these levels of parent and family engagement and the contribution of the home environment in forming the attitudes, values and positive behaviours contribute **60%** of the factors which conduce to effective learning and personal development. The real synergy is of course linking that positive aspect to the 30% of positive factors which the school provides through quality teaching.

And so the evidence goes on. We could continue citing such positive research findings indefinitely: including the twenty years of work in the field by Joyce Epstein and her team at Johns Hopkins University, through to the 2004 Issues Paper which we commissioned in connection with our work with DEST in the development of the Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework, presently with MCEETYA for national endorsement and adoption. You will see a wide range of research presented on the Families Matter site at; <http://www.familiesmatter.org.au> and also in the Family-School Partnerships section of the ACSSO site at: <http://www.acsso.org.au>

This brings us to the **HOW** of establishing and building effective and sustainable partnerships.

This is an area where ACSSO and APC have between them some 100 years of active practical experience.

- In particular, as evidenced by our work on the **Family-School Partnership Framework** document and its action research testing in 61 schools across the country in 2005-2006.
- And as evidenced in the research, development, design and national implementation of **Families Matter 2002 – 2006**.

However desirable, such effective partnerships do not simply or spontaneously happen of their own accord. 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 recognise, work through and resolve such blocking and limiting factors requires a considerable sustained level of understanding, commitment and goodwill: founded on the clear shared premise that all parents and families want the best possible outcomes for their children.

You can only achieve effective and sustainable engagement, involvement and partnership with parents and families on their terms. This must be based on a respectful recognition of their special role as the first and continuing educators of their children, and responsive to their needs and expectations. The engagement process must necessarily be flexible and adaptable to the particular community context and circumstances.

An engagement and partnership process cannot be imposed from outside the community, nor based upon a deficit model or mindset, in which partnership remains an academic set of concepts and premises, with external authority figures talking down to parents and families, and telling them how they should think, feel and behave. The process is necessarily an interactive one, which encourages participative access and ownership among the parties themselves, in terms that are directly relevant to them and their community.

These essential principles are explored in particular in the work of Rollande Deslandes in terms of extensive work she and her team have carried out in Canada over many years. As she notes in the paper referenced: *“Our view of genuine partnership is one based on mutual trust, common goals and two-way communication. To collaborate is to participate in the accomplishment of a task or the assumption of a responsibility. Partnership is therefore a collaborative relationship between two parties, and parental involvement is a means of establishing it”*

That paper explores a conceptual model of parent and family involvement which is shaped by the foundation work of Bronfenbrenner (an ecological model based upon the results of psychological and sociological studies) and others such as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler:

“The model reasons that parents decide to participate when they understand that collaboration is part of their role as parents, when they believe they can positively influence their child’s education and when they perceive that the child and the school wish them to be involved. The model suggests that once parents make the decision to participate, they choose specific activities shaped by their perception of their own skills and abilities, other demands on their time and energy and specific invitations to involvement from children, teachers and schools. The model also holds that parental involvement influences children’s educational outcomes by means of modeling, reinforcement and instruction, three mechanisms which are, in turn, mediated by the developmental appropriateness of parents’ strategies and the fit between parents’ actions and the expectations of the school. The goal of parental involvement here is its influence on the child’s educational outcomes, particularly his or her knowledge, skills and sense of efficacy for succeeding in school. At the first level, the model suggests that parents’ decision to become involved in their child’s education varies according to

- 1) *their construction of the parental role,*
- 2) *their sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed, and*
- 3) *the invitations, demands and opportunities for involvement presented by the child and the school.”*

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”.

While that discussion is mainly about academic achievement, it is axiomatically obvious that in most situations, sustained academic achievement is necessarily underpinned by positive self image, sense of purpose and positive outlook , an appropriate level of resilience and coping – which is also being fostered and supported by high levels of positive parental involvement and emotional support. Young people who are not feeling OK, who feel depressed, isolated or alienated, with no sense of direction or purpose, tend to exhibit negative behaviours which affect their learning and academic progress, including patterns of truancy and absenteeism, poor concentration and retention, etc.

ACSSO and APC have demonstrated their capacity to make that HOW happen in action in the widest possible range of school communities across the whole of Australia over the past three years, in two outstandingly successful initiatives:

- **Family-School Partnerships Action Research 2005-2006** in 61 schools selected by the Parent bodies and funded by DEST: the report is with the Minister seeking clearance for publication and for MCEETYA to endorse the findings through the national Framework.
- The “**Families Matter**” initiative 2002 – 2006.

The strong common conceptual links between these two major initiatives can be indicated not only in the findings of external reviews, but also in that a significant number of the Family-School Partnerships school communities, used the Families Matter processes as the driving and sustaining vehicle for the activities in their school community.

The effectiveness of “Families Matter” in a wide range of school communities, its current benefits and strong forward potential to engage parents and families with their school and community, is clearly evident from the findings and learnings from the “Evaluation of Families Matter” reported by the external team of Denis Muller & Associates (2006); which states:

“The experience of the program by school communities was uniformly favourable, and for the same main reasons we had heard before. These are important and bear re-stating:

- *Families Matter 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, moreover, by allowing parents to decide what it is they want to talk about, and how they want to talk about it*
- *Families Matter creates a vehicle for partnerships between families and schools. It is prized by principals and school staff for this quality*
- *Families Matter gives some parents new self-confidence and contributes to their personal development.”*

The outstanding efficacy of “Families Matter” as developed and conducted by the Parent organisations is strongly underlined by the following discussion led by Dr Elizabeth Murphy on ABC Radio on 1 December 2004 (referenced: a full transcription is accessible on the Families Matter website)

Dr Elizabeth Murphy was reviewing the pressures and negative impacts that can affect the learning and personal development of young people: and the need for building better communications and stronger family and community support. A Principal of a school in NSW rang in and said with great enthusiasm:

“We are trying a great new strategy in our school. There is a government sponsored program called ‘Families Matter’ designed to build teenagers’ resilience to cope with life’s problems. It’s a beautiful system where parents of the school, whom we pick, go away to do training with professional facilitators, then come back to run forums for other parents to learn more about how to help their teenagers. This initiative really seems to be working well in our school community!”

Dr Murphy responded : *“Fantastic point. That’s one of the things that is really important. We have early childhood parents groups because we know how important it is that parents continue to meet after their children are no longer babies, and yet it doesn’t seem to be there in the teenage years where parents need it probably more than any other time. Anything that facilitates parents getting together – a problem shared is a problem that is not as great. And also there is resource from one parent to another that could really help you with your child. A structured program like this one [Families Matter] is excellent, but it could happen informally as well.Referring back to the caller who spoke so eloquently about the “Families Matter” initiative for bringing parents together to talk through the issues around the emotional development of young people, **the best strategy for parents is to form active communication and support networks with other parents in their school community.***

That is pretty much just what we are seeking to encourage in school communities right across the country with “Families Matter”. In terms of community needs identified by Richard Eckersley’s important book “Well & Good”, we seek to achieve a cultural change in school communities to help young people meet their basic human needs for belonging, meaning and identity, through simple logical processes, in ways that will strengthen and transform our society.

The strongly positive findings of the recent Evaluation of Families Matter show that we can put cost-effective measures in place that demonstrate that we are heading in the right directions with Families Matter, and making significant progress in a range of school communities in terms of positive engagement and partnership building with parents, families, schools and communities

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