



Family-School  
& Community  
Partnerships  
Bureau



# Family School Partners

**November 2008**

**Newsletter of the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau**

## Welcome to the Bureau's second e-Newsletter

It seems hard to believe that the year is drawing to a close and the Bureau has been at full steam for around six months.

The past few months have been devoted largely to action research in our case studies schools that began their journey with parent and community partnerships in 2005.

We've also put time and energy into strengthening connections and building alliances with a number of professional, community, parent and government bodies that share the Bureau's commitment to partnerships between schools, families and communities.

I'm keen to identify resources and programs that have been developed or are being trialled because schools urgently need practical support and advice.

I see a strong role for the Bureau as a broker for good practice, and certainly as a mechanism through which schools and families can learn about opportunities that are emerging to support partnership initiatives.

This newsletter draws attention to some very interesting developments.

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## The Bureau's research program

There are four broad areas of inquiry in our current research effort:

1. How to engage parents in the education of their children
2. How to sustain a partnership project
3. Resourcing a partnership project
4. Evaluating a partnership project

The good news from our last couple of months in the field is that all those case studies partnerships from 2005 have so far proven sustainable. But it is equally clear that there are risks to be managed. There are no lifetime guarantees around partnerships.

The departure of a key participant, the reallocation of limited resources, or a change in school priorities, are just some of the things that can deal a severe blow to even the healthiest partnership. A couple of the schools we've looked at have weathered such occurrences

Visiting the schools, along with the Bureau's consultant researcher Dr Denis Muller, has been a genuinely uplifting experience. The parents, principals and teachers we've met have been inspirational.

Their commitment to young people, their vision for their schools and communities, and their energetic, 'can do' approach – often in very difficult circumstances – are the hallmarks of their success.

The Bureau presented an **interim report** on our research to the National Conference of the [Australian Council of State School Organisations](#) in October. Here are some of the highlights:

- Family-school and community partnerships, where they work well, are re-defining education. The children's learning benefits from the parents' presence in the school. Parents are learning how to help their child academically and gaining the confidence to do so. Parents are demonstrating to their children, by becoming involved themselves, the importance of education.
- While successful partnerships are working in all kinds of socio-economic settings, their effectiveness at engaging parents is seen most dramatically in low socio-economic areas.
- The commitment by the principals derives from both a recognition that the partnership improves students' life chances, and a philosophical outlook that steers them towards responding to the needs of parents and communities.
- The commitment by parents is very often grounded in personal growth and blossoms into a strong generosity of spirit. The parents gain great personal satisfaction from their involvement in a partnership with the school, and it continues to help them as individuals to learn and grow.
- Family-school and community partnerships can be transformative in ways that go well beyond the classroom. The transformation builds social capital by creating new social networks in a community, crossing ethnic boundaries, helping people understand 'the Australian way of doing things', raising people's self-esteem, teaching them new skills and knowledge and, by virtue of all this, empowering them to participate in community life and to assist positively with their children's education.
- With this increase in social capital comes an increase in community capacity. People who once had no capacity to engage in civic life now put themselves forward for community duties – as volunteers, members of community groups and as advocates for the school and community in the wider world.

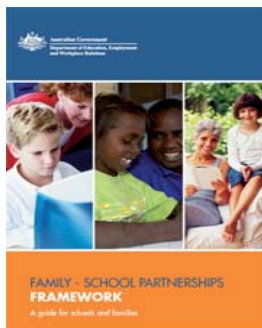
It remains a sad fact that resourcing for partnership projects is minimal in most schools. It depends on the goodwill of staff and parents to give their time, and the capacity of the school to provide premises and cover overheads.

As was seen in the 2005 study, the creation of a parent liaison person is, in many schools, critical to the success of the partnership project. Putting it bluntly, if governments want school-family partnerships to flourish, they will have to fund resources like family liaison officers.

The amounts do not have to be large -- \$10,000 to \$20,000 per school – but the lesson from this and other research indicates that the value-for-money return is extremely high.

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## The National Family-School Partnerships Framework



Education Minister Julia Gillard has recently sent to all Australian schools and parent organisations copies of a **Guide to the National Family-School Partnerships Framework** .

The Framework sets out the principles of effective partnerships and highlights strategies that schools and parents can use to guide and develop partnerships.

Download at <http://www.familyschool.org.au/pdf/framework.pdf>.

In her Media Release, the Minister said that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life and the evidence shows that when schools, parents and communities work in partnership, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and enjoy school more.

Minister Gillard said that the Framework underpins the ideals of the recently established Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau and will complement the work of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Productivity Agenda Working Group.

COAG has identified boosting parental engagement as a key policy direction to improve school participation and achievement, reduce educational disadvantage and promote social inclusion.

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## What's up?

Along with spending a lot of time talking to school principals and parents about their partnerships, the Bureau also finds itself connecting with all sorts of individuals and organisations who are keen to see school-family-community partnerships flourishing.



We thought you might like to get a feel for what's happening in all sorts of places and for all sorts of reasons.

I received a letter some months ago from a former teacher, **Angie Wilcock**, who was so convinced of the crucial importance of involving parents in their children's education that she set about developing workshops for parents, initially around the transition phases in schooling.

After several phone calls and emails we finally got together and had some detailed discussions about Angie's ideas and activities.

Angie has been running workshops commercially for the past 18 months and says they have 'hit the mark' with parents. The workshops are designed to provide practical help to parents in things such as transition to high school, organisational and time management skills, and essay and assignment writing,

Her website is <http://www.highhopes.com.au/>

The **Parenting Research Centre** is based in Melbourne, and is a national, independent, not-for-profit research and development organisation established to help parents raise happy healthy children. The Bureau has met with the PRC several times to explore how we might collaborate, especially in relation to the PRC's AusParenting in Schools program.

AusParenting in Schools aims to promote the wellbeing and resilience of children by helping schools to:

- strengthen family-school partnerships
- encourage family involvement in their children's education
- provide parenting information and resources to all families in the school community.

The program provides a framework, resources and comprehensive training to support schools, teachers and parents improve outcomes for children. It includes a professional development workshop - *Building Partnerships with Families* - for school personnel; training for school professionals to provide parenting education seminars; and a parent program - *Transition to Primary School*.

The Bureau believes that there are some strong synergies between the organisations and with any luck we will soon be collaborating in very practical ways to broaden the reach and impact of the AusParenting initiative. The PRC website is at <http://www.parentingrc.org.au/vp/>.

The issue of **teacher professional development** is one that arises regularly in the Bureau's discussions with both principals and parents. Teachers themselves frequently lament the fact that developing skills in engaging with parents was not part of their pre-service teacher training.

In fact, in a recent major national survey of their professional development needs, teachers placed engaging with parents at the top of their list. Time and stress management came a long way behind in second place.

From its research into school-family partnerships, the Bureau is well placed to assist school systems and university teacher education programs in developing programs to strengthen teachers' capacities in this increasingly important parental-engagement aspect of their role. We hope to begin that conversation with key players early in 2009.

Have you heard about the **Schools First** initiative being sponsored by the National Australia Bank? With a **prize pool of \$5 million** every year for three years, Schools First is a national awards program that provides financial recognition of success in establishing effective school-community partnerships and financial support to build stronger school-community partnerships. It's open to all Australian primary and secondary schools, whether they're public or private, special needs, religious or independent.

The program will commence in February 2009, with a series of 80 Schools First workshops held in major cities and regional centres around Australia to enable schools and communities to work together on specific issues that address student learning needs, and to guide a project at the local level.

Schools can then enter the national awards program. Visit [www.schoolsfirst.edu.au](http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au).

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## Resources to assist parents

The Bureau has its antennae constantly tuned to picking up on resources, debates and ideas that might be of interest to parents, especially in terms of assisting their children's education, or engaging with schools.

Here's a few that we think are worth passing on.

### Parenting Tips

The **Association of Heads of Independent Schools** publishes a monthly online newsletter called Parenting Tips. We think it has lots of useful advice.

Check it out for yourself at <http://www.ahisa.com.au/Display.aspx?tabid=2203>.

### Parenting in Practice

*by Joseph Degeling & Christine Langridge, 2nd Edition 2008*

The first edition of this excellent book - strongly recommended by both [ACSSO](#) and the [Australian Parents Council](#) - was rapidly sold out.

The strategies come from a hands-on parenting program and extensive experience in working with parents. The skills and strategies which it presents can be applied in every parent's daily life.

While it certainly does not ignore the negative influences that can impact adversely on a young person's development, its emphasis is on building positive habits into the parenting process right from the beginning. For example:

- establishing realistic boundaries and expectations appropriate to the child's age and stage of development;
- focusing on the consequences of behaviours - with an emphasis on the positive consequences and recognition of positive behaviours and achievements;
- looking after yourself and your own supportive relationships, so you can maintain your focus and balance as a reflective, positive and nurturing parent.

This booklet packs a vast quantity of very practical wisdom, experience and good advice into its pages, and is highly recommended to parents at any stage of their shared journey as the primary educators and role models for their child. It retails at \$14.99 (inclusive of GST) - with big discounts for multiple copies ordered - and proceeds go to support the Berne Education Centre for young people at risk. For more details: <http://www.johnberneschool.org/PDF/PiPFlyer.pdf>

### **CLICK! Technology guide for parents**

Developed by the NSW Department of Education and Training this online magazine assists parents in finding out about all the technologies your child could be using at school, at home and while out and about.

CLICK! is full of information about how things work, what is good about them and things you may need to be careful of. <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/news/technology/index.php>

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## **Reporting to parents**

There has been considerable public controversy in recent years over the reporting of student performance grades to parents. We thought you'd like to know what the teaching profession has to say.

The **Australian Primary Principals Association** (APPA) put out its position statement in June 2008. It's available at <http://www.appa.asn.au/NEWS/?IntCatId=16>

APPA supports the principle of reporting to parents in everyday language that can be understood by laypersons. However, many schools use various methods to keep parents informed of their child's progress at school. One form of reporting does not suit all situations.

Teachers, on the other hand, for their own professional purposes may use a more technical language. Further, they must have regard for the impact of the grades on the child's self esteem and motivation.

APPA does not therefore support the adoption of a single, mandatory method of reporting. Schools will take all of the considerations into account and have the autonomy to adopt the procedures suitable for their community.

The **Australian Secondary Principals Association** statement on reporting to parents is available at <http://www.aspa.asn.au/content/view/26/37/>

ASPA believes that all schools - irrespective of sector and system - should report on agreed measures and is opposed to the dissemination of narrow measures of school performance which lead to a simplistic comparison of schools.

ASPA supports providing the community with an appropriate and agreed range of measures of school performance which will better inform parents, and believes that the current use to which some

measures of school performance information are put is inappropriate and, in some instances, destructive.

Longitudinal measures are more valuable when measuring school performance, says ASPA.

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## What in the world?

The Bureau works hard at keeping up to date with initiatives in other countries that have the potential to guide and inform policies and programs in Australia about schools' engagement with families and communities.

Here are a few initiatives in the USA that we think are worth a closer look.

### High schools – how parents see them

A new national report, ***One Dream, Two Realities***, commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation - reveals that parents with less education, lower incomes and children in low-performing high schools are the most likely to see a rigorous education, and their own involvement, as critical to their child's success.

These parents want to be more involved, but are frustrated when schools do not provide them with good information or opportunities to participate more fully.

You can read news reports about this at <http://washingtontimes.com/news/2008/oct/27/parental-role-is-critical/> or at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/1027/p02s01-usgn.html>

You can download a pdf of the full report from <http://www.civicenterprises.net/>

### Setting a community agenda for schools

The **Coalition for Community Schools** is an alliance of US national, state and local organizations in education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy.

The Coalition advocates for strengthening schools, families and communities so that together they can improve student learning. The Coalition has established **The Community Agenda** as its prime advocacy tool, declaring a commitment to work together to create strong and purposeful partnerships for change and results.

The Community Agenda is built on four core beliefs:

1. Communities and schools are fundamentally and positively **interconnected**. Engaged communities build strong schools; effective schools are essential to strong communities.
2. Schools can make a difference in the lives of all children. The **quality** of schools matters. High academic standards, rigorous curricula, high-quality teachers, effective school leadership, aligned tests, accountability, and strong professional development are important factors for student success.
3. Children do better when their families do better. We recognize this inextricable connection and actively support the strengthening and empowering of **families**.
4. The development of the whole child is a critical factor for student success. Children grow into successful adulthood through high-quality instructional opportunities in school and out of school; by exploring their talents and interests through **experiences** that stretch their **aspirations**; and by receiving the social, emotional, and physical **support** they need to succeed.

Explore The Community Agenda in more detail at <http://www.thecommunityagenda.org/>

## Standards for partnerships between schools and their communities

The **Parent Teacher Association** is the largest volunteer child advocacy association in the US. It seeks to be a powerful voice on behalf of every child, and to provide tools for parents to help their children be successful students. The PTA has established a comprehensive set of standards for family-school-community partnerships. Here they are in summary:

**Standard 1:** Welcoming all families into the school community—Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

**Standard 2:** Communicating effectively—Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.

**Standard 3:** Supporting student success—Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

**Standard 4:** Speaking up for every child—Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

**Standard 5:** Sharing power—Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.

**Standard 6:** Collaborating with community—Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

The PTA has not only established a set of levels within each of these standards, but developed a useful **Power of Partnerships Family Survey** that can be used to gather information about how well schools are engaging with families and communities. You can track all these down by following the links from [http://www.pta.org/family\\_school\\_partnerships.asp](http://www.pta.org/family_school_partnerships.asp).



### Tell us your story

The Bureau wants to build up a collection of video stories about schools that we can use to inspire other schools and their communities. If you think you've got a story worth telling, contact me at [brenton.holmes@familyschool.org.au](mailto:brenton.holmes@familyschool.org.au).

## Christmas, families, holidays and all that

As you are reading this Newsletter, your mind is no doubt straying to the delights of the forthcoming Christmas season – its festivities, its recreation, its family connections.

I hope you have a safe and happy time, and that 2009 proves to be all that you could wish.

Regards

**Brenton Holmes**  
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