



Family-School  
& Community  
Partnerships  
Bureau



# Family School Partners

March 2009

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

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

I hope you've had a chance to visit our revamped website <http://www.familyschool.org.au>.

It's great to see people are already using its three main interactive elements to connect with the Bureau and to send us their views. The blog should keep everyone up-to-date with the Bureau's work. I'll also use it to address, in general terms, some of the issues that arise through website posts or emails.

In this edition of the e-Newsletter, we're focussing on **homework**. It's one of the tricky areas that families and students need to negotiate. As usual, good information and open communication will help everyone - teachers, students and parents.

Learning at home is too often an under-appreciated element of educational success. A good home learning environment can make a huge difference to the experience of schooling. It can be rewarding for parents as well as students, as they come to share the challenges and knowledge that homework entails.

Please feel free to forward this newsletter to interested friends and colleagues, and let them know they can subscribe directly by simply going to our website and entering their email address.

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## First things

### Education Week Awards (Victoria) for parents

If you're connected with a government school in Victoria, here's your chance to nominate a parent or community member for an **Outstanding Parent** or **Education Community Service Award**.

The Outstanding Parent Awards 'recognise parent participation, their ideas and enthusiasm' while the Community Service Awards 'will be presented to members of the community who have contributed to positive educational experiences for children attending Victorian government schools'.

Signed nomination forms must be faxed or emailed to the coordinator by 5pm Friday 20 March.

Find out more at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/events/edweek/awards.htm>

### Flick the switch for Earth Hour

**Earth Hour** encourages individuals and families to take action and reduce their greenhouse emissions by switching out their lights and turning off non-essential electrical appliances.

This year **Earth Hour is on 28 March from 8.30pm to 9.30pm** local time, wherever you are.

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## Homework

### Tips for parents



We come across various tips to assist parents help their children get the most out of their education, and we'll pass the best of them on through this newsletter.

In this edition, we're looking at **homework**.

Well-designed homework helps students learn. It also offers parents opportunities to see what their children are learning and to talk about it with them. And it creates opportunities for schools, families and students to interact.

Teachers play a critical role in helping parents become involved. By sharing ideas about homework with parents, they can increase family support for learning.

A couple of years ago, the Australian Council for State School Organisations (**ACSSO**) produced a preliminary paper about how schools might develop effective policy and practice around homework. That paper has recently been revised and updated, drawing on available international and Australian research. But there is still work to be done. As the paper notes,

*Many of the "standard" papers referenced here are now at least five years old. Many are much less recent. The underlying research in some of these cases predates widespread access to the internet and anything like the contemporary level of access from homes to an expanding array of online resources. It seems likely that factors such as rapid advances in technology may have changed the learning context for students and families in significant ways over the past fifteen years.*

Nonetheless, the paper contains much of interest. Download a copy of ***HOMEWORK: What are the upsides and the downsides*** in [PDF format](#) or [MS Word format](#) .

**Angie Wilcock** is a teacher, parent and consultant who has taken a keen interest in the Bureau and its support for families. Angie has developed a range of training and support programs for parents with her company **High Hopes Educational Services** (<http://www.highhopes.com.au>) and I asked her to give us her views on homework.

### Assignments - Don't Let Them Beat You

A major headache for students and parents alike, homework can be the cause of many family arguments (and nagging!), but it doesn't have to be that way. It's all about being organised and managing your time.

Discussions I have with both parents and students generally centre on the same issue - too much homework and not enough time (parents can get almost as stressed as the students when it comes to completing work on time). Students do need to take more responsibility as they get further into their senior years, but parents still like to 'stay in the loop' and offer constructive help when they can.

My suggestion is simple - if you can't control the amount of homework and assignments given then you must take charge of how you get it done. In simple terms, you need a SYSTEM.

Here are key tips for **organisation** and **time management**:

- Develop a filing and storage system for notes, papers etc - don't work in chaos!
- Use a diary to keep track of all activities - and keep checking it
- Use a planner to allocate specific time slots for completion of work
- 'Chunk' work - in other words, break down assignments into smaller, more manageable tasks
- Prioritise tasks and start planning/working on assignments as soon as you get them.

Some of the most illuminating research about how parents, supported by teachers, can best help their children with homework has come out of the **Harvard Family Research Project**. Take a look at an overview of this research at: <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/parental-involvement-in-homework-a-review-of-current-research-and-its-implications-for-teachers-after-school-program-staff-and-parent-leaders>

## Helping with maths

We all know by now about the importance of reading to young children and pointing out words and letters to help start them on the journey toward literacy but do we pay the same attention to **numeracy**?

The Tasmanian Education Department's magazine **Engage** has some useful tips:

Parents and carers play a vital role in helping children develop the mathematical skills they need to become numerate, and this begins well before children start school. Things such as telling the time, sharing out food, working out how much money is needed for bread and milk, reading the television guide. There's so much maths in all we do.

You can help your child by:

- Counting anything and everything: socks, pegs, people, teddy bears, pebbles, shells. Say the words as you touch the objects "One, two, three ..."
- Pointing out numbers at home and all around, eg on the clock, on a car number-plate, on a bus sign, on the TV or microwave, at the shops.
- Reading books and stories with maths ideas in them, such as *Three Pigs*, *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, and counting books and everyday reading materials such as birthday cards and shopping catalogues.
- Pointing out mathematical words, such as big, small, tall, long, high, square and so on, as you read books and talk about pictures.

Show your child how you use maths around the home. When cooking, talk about the half-cup measure and show how you cut items into pieces. Ask, "How many pieces will we cut the pizza into?", "Do you want your sandwich in triangles or squares?"

Provide your child with simple materials to have fun with numbers, such as a calendar for their room, some dice, magnetic numbers, and counters. Most of all, make it fun and remember that your talk and use of language is vital to learning.

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## Doing the family-school thing well

We're always keen to hear about good ideas and best practice from schools successfully engaging parents in their children's learning.

So I was interested to receive some handbooks and DVDs from **Kevin Lowe**, who's the Inspector, Aboriginal Education with the NSW Office of the Board of Studies. The handbooks are:

- ***The Journey's Just Begun: Enhancing schools' capacity to partner Aboriginal communities to improve student learning***. This is a facilitator handbook, with accompanying DVD, which draws on the experiences and wisdom of a number of Aboriginal communities who have developed strong partnerships with their schools via curriculum-based projects. The DVD also showcases some great original music by George Fisher and friends.
- ***Working with Aboriginal Communities***. This updates the community consultation protocols that will maximise the benefits of drawing Aboriginal perspectives into studies across the curriculum

Find out more from <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>



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## The National Family-School Partnerships Framework

Has your school, or your P&C, received its copy of the Guide to the **National Family-School Partnerships Framework**?

Download it at (<http://www.familyschool.org.au/pdf/framework.pdf>), or get a hard copy by mail by emailing me your postal address ([brenton.holmes@familyschool.org.au](mailto:brenton.holmes@familyschool.org.au)).

Principle 3 of the Framework is that "**Families are the first and continuing educators of their children**".

Dimension B of the Framework is "**Connecting learning at home and at school**".

Anyone still unconvinced about **the importance of parents remaining engaged** with their children's learning throughout their school years needs to see a Queensland University of Technology study. It was unequivocal in stating "Support at home increases chance of school success". Indeed, they say family involvement can have a "huge" impact on how children learn.

**Associate Professor Donna Berthelsen** and **Dr Sue Walker**, from the School of Early Childhood in QUT's Faculty of Education, are involved with an ongoing, government-funded, longitudinal study of 10,000 Australian children. They have examined the influence of parents on children's learning and how parental involvement at school affects learning.

"The family has the largest influence on children's learning outcomes and how parents value school education is very important," Professor Berthelsen said in a news release. "If parents are involved with their children's learning in the early years of school, it makes it more likely that their children will complete school and go on to further study."

She said that of the parents interviewed when the children were in Years 1 and 2 at school, around 99 per cent expected their children to complete schooling. However, only 60 per cent were viewed by teachers as being very involved with their children's education.

"Almost without exception, parents expressed a wish for their children to finish school and go to university, but in Australia the number of students who do so is under 80 per cent." But parents who remain engaged with schools throughout their child's education are more likely to have children who complete high school and go on to further study.



In discussing the observed drop off of parental involvement as school years progress, Professor Berthelsen said more outreach from schools to parents could help keep them involved. "At the same time," she added, "there are many things parents can do at home to support learning. It is important parents don't see schools as solely responsible for their child's learning."

"Helping with homework and discussing experiences at school and what is being learned lets children know that their parents are interested and concerned."

Find the news release in full here <http://www.news.qut.edu.au/cgi-bin/WebObjects/News.woa/wa/goNewsPage?newsEventID=24297>

### **Can Training Help Parents to be more Effective Partners in Schools?**

Often, parents who want to participate in schools are unsure about what it involves. Shared responsibility and trust between school staff and eager-to-help parents is crucial, but how is it created?

Principle 7 of the Framework deals with this topic, stating "**Family-school partnerships are based on mutual responsibility, respect and trust**". Dimension B of the Framework is "**Participating**".

One parent with a track record of effective participation in her children's school is **Marie Lynch** from Queensland. Marie approached the Bureau for advice about whether there were any **accredited volunteer training programs** to help consolidate parents' engagement. **Terri Judd** of South Australia's Federation of Catholic School Parent Communities has such a program.

Its aim, Terri explains, is "to develop and celebrate the changing nature of parental engagement and involvement".

The training program was developed by the Federation and a special reference group, and it is designed to attract and support potential parent leaders in school communities. **The Parent Participation and Leadership Program** was tailored specifically to Catholic schools, meaning its content reflects the ethos and culture of those schools.

But it also opens up avenues for parents beyond individual school involvement. The Federation has reached an agreement with TAFE SA that means participants in the program can apply for a 'Statement of Attainment' in two particular areas of Community Services and Active Volunteering.

For more information on the program contact Terri via email [terri.judd@ceo.adl.catholic.edu.au](mailto:terri.judd@ceo.adl.catholic.edu.au) or by phone on 08-8301 6686.

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## This Digital Life

### Using technology to connect schools and families

You'll recall that in the last newsletter we looked at the ways information and communication technologies are influencing the way schools and families interact.

Further to that topic, the Harvard Family Research Project recently reported on ***The Role of the Internet in Family-School Communication***. Here's some of what the lead researcher, Suzanne Bouffard, had to say:

*"Communication is at the heart of family-school relationships. Ongoing, two-way communication is associated with students' academic success ... and lays the foundation for many other forms of family involvement ... However, family-school communication can be challenging for logistical, emotional, and cultural reasons ... Educators often ask, "How can we promote more frequent and meaningful communication with families?"*

In the Information Age, Internet technology represents an opportunity for increasing communication between families and schools.

Internet-based communication methods, including email, websites and newer social networking technologies such as blogs, present new opportunities for family-school communication. These technologies may reduce scheduling barriers that pose challenges to traditional forms of family-school communication, can convey information to multiple families at once, and can efficiently share and archive information about student progress, school policies and assignments, tips for family involvement, and other topics.

Read the full article here:

<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/tapping-into-technology-the-role-of-the-internet-in-family-school-communication>



The Harvard findings have **implications for Australia** and how we might want to deal with these questions here. Among the points of interest in the paper are these:

- More than one third of families have used the internet to communicate with schools, but the average frequency of contact was approximately once or twice per year. Over 60% of school administrators reported that teachers in their schools used the internet to communicate with families. Data suggest, however, that school administrators may have underestimated the use of such communications.
- Families with higher incomes and more education were not only more likely to have access to the internet, but were also more likely to use it to communicate with schools when they did have access.
- Internet-based family-school communication is associated with higher achievement and higher educational expectations. Students whose families used Internet-based school communication demonstrated more positive outcomes in the 12th-grade data-collection wave. These students were also significantly less likely to drop out of school.
- Based on theory and previous research, the study hypothesized that internet-based communication would lead to other forms of involvement (parent-child discussion about education and family involvement in homework), which would, in turn, lead to positive student outcomes. This hypothesis was *not* supported by the findings.

Overall, findings suggest that the internet represents a promising but largely untapped opportunity for promoting family-school communication. Despite such communication being relatively infrequent at present, it is associated with academic benefits. These patterns occurred in adolescence, a time when family involvement tends to decline. The internet may represent an opportunity to maintain or even increase communication between schools and families of adolescents.

Some parents are seriously concerned about what they see as **online dangers** their children might be exposed to, including at sites such as You Tube which feature content uploaded by users. Here's an extract from a recent post called "**Reflections of a millennium mum**" on the Australian current affairs blog Online Opinion:

*"From the creche to the grave our children are being sold movie plots with their McDinnners, product placement with their news and movies and "reality" media which promotes in every child the idea that they too can raise themselves from obscurity to media-mainstream if they do something stupid or offensive enough to become a YouTube hit. Rather than learning boundaries and judgment this new world is teaching our children that boundaries are bad, commonsense is passé and the weird and wacky is the highest form of entertainment.*

*Pity the parents and teachers who have to compete with this 24/7 stream-of-anti-consciousness and try to teach their children that consumerism is not a value, celebrity is not a role model and the media advertorial is not the fourth estate. Surrounded by this moral nihilism it becomes more and more difficult for parents to cultivate and maintain a sense of authority when the validity of boundaries is constantly undermined, not only by popular culture but by the fashionably intellectual as well ..."*

Read more here: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=8512>

But there are other views, too, including those who see "**moral panic**" about online dangers as a veiled attempt to control girls. **Justine Cassell** and **Meg Cramer** at the Center for Technology and Social Behavior at Northwestern University in the U.S. make their case in a piece called "High Tech or High Risk: Moral Panics about Girls Online":

"We argue that the current moral outrage and national panic over the risks of victimisation faced by girls on the Internet has nothing to do with risks faced by girls on the internet.

Based on historical, cross-cultural, and discourse analyses, we draw four conclusions. Each and every time a new communication technology is introduced, it spurs very public fears on the part of parents and educators, putatively about the effects of that technology on girls' (sexual) innocence.

The statistics show that predatory behaviour on adolescent girls has a certain profile that has either not changed over the decade since the internet became popular, or has improved over time.

The internet dangerously unfetters girls' spaces and risks changing our image of what girls can do, and where they can go. This challenges the social order.

Girls' masterful use of the internet also challenges the view that technology is dangerous and an inappropriate interest for girls, and in this sense the moral panic around girls online is a way of policing the relationship between girls and technology."

Read more here: <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/dmal.9780262633598.053>

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## Bits 'n Pieces

### A couple more items of interest:

- There is a wide range of information and resources available to help families and young people, and one source is **Robin Cox**. Robin is a career transition manager with Schools Industry Partnership in NSW, and the author of Letter to a teen: Becoming the best that I can be. He has been involved in mentoring and multicultural education for over 30 years. His website <http://www.yess.co.nz> has a **Parents and Teens Blog** page as well as details of his work.
  - A series of public seminars called **Generation Next** will be held in various capital cities starting in May. They will cover a range of topics including Sex and the Media, Internet & Cybersafety, Sexuality & Teenagers, Drugs & Alcohol and Positive Parenting. Presenters include adolescent psychologist **Dr Michael Carr-Gregg**, **Paul Dil** from Drug & Alcohol Research, representatives of Training Australia and others. The seminars are supported by organisations including beyondblue and the Tedd Noffs Foundation. Cost is \$45 per person, full details on the website at <http://www.gennextseminars.com>.
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## 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've got one worth telling, contact me at [brenton.holmes@familyschool.org.au](mailto:brenton.holmes@familyschool.org.au).

Regards

*Brenton Holmes*

### **Brenton Holmes**

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