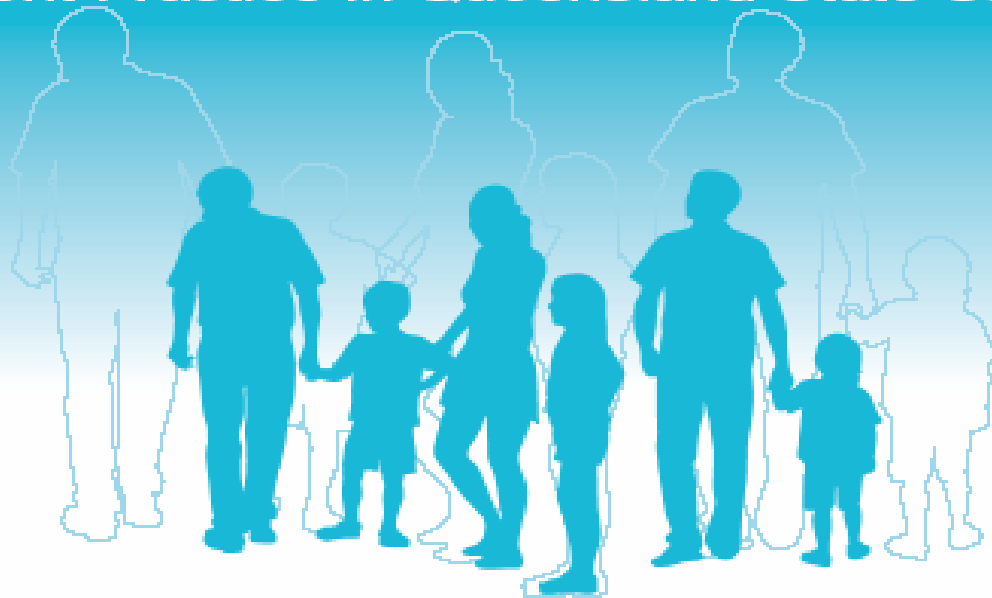


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**Review of Parental Engagement in
Queensland State Schools:
A Literature Review and Case Studies of
Current Practice in Queensland State Schools**



**Report for the Department of Education, Training
and the Arts, Queensland Government.**

Educational Transformations

29 June 2007



**educational
transformations**

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Executive Summary

1. Background

This project was commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts to gain a stronger understanding of the available research on the impact of parental engagement on student learning and outcomes. The project also identifies strategies which are currently used in some Queensland state schools to enhance the involvement of parents (including parents, guardians and all those who provide care to school-aged students). The report provides a strong evidence basis for future policy developments or service delivery reforms for schools in Queensland.

At both Commonwealth and state levels, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of parent-school partnerships and strengthening parental engagement in schools. The Queensland Government is committed to improving parent and community participation in all aspects of school education. In this context, it is important to determine if practical changes to current parent engagement policies and practices will benefit the educational outcomes of students in Queensland state schools. It is also vital to examine the ways to enhance and support all types of parent involvement in their children's learning, while recognising the diverse cultural and social backgrounds of school communities and the different social, economic and geographical contexts in which Queensland state schools operate.

2. Method

The project involved three main components:

1. An extensive review of Queensland, Australian and international literature on the relationship between all types of parental engagement and student outcomes.
2. The conduct of case studies of ten state schools in Queensland through a series of interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in each school.
3. An analysis of key implications for policy and practice to enhance parental engagement in Queensland state schools based on the results of the project.

3. Models of Parental Engagement: Literature Review

The first phase of this project examined current research to determine if there are practical methods or innovations that enhance the relationships between parents and schools and which will provide benefits for students in Queensland state schools.

The term 'student outcomes' has been used in this context to describe all forms of outcomes, including, but not limited to, students' academic achievement. Research findings on the influence of parental engagement academic achievement are inconsistent, due to the large number of variables that can affect student learning. There is strong evidence to suggest, however, that different types of parental involvement have an

influence on levels of student motivation, engagement, retention, behaviour and learning in specific subject areas.

The first phase of this project provides a critical review of Queensland, Australian and international research on the impact that each type parental involvement can have on improved student outcomes. This report of literature recognises the importance of examining all types of parent engagement and is organised according to Epstein's (1995) model of parental involvement activities. Epstein's model is the most frequently used in studies in this area. This model offers categories for the complex and diverse range of activities, behaviours and attitudes that can be defined as parental involvement. These categorisations include:

1. *Parenting* This category is used to refer to some forms of parental involvement in children's education in the home, including parents' attitudes towards education and executing their choice of a school for their child.
2. *Communicating* All forms of communication between parents and the school are included in this category of activities. Two sub-categories of communication have been added in this project to describe forms of communication that are structured by schools and less formal communication activities that can be initiated by either parents or the school.
3. *Volunteering* This category refers to parents acting as volunteers for the school, which may be directly related to classroom activities or to general school activities.
4. *Learning at home* The activities described by this category include all types of parents' support and involvement with school-initiated activities in the home, such as homework or other educational activities to be completed outside of the school.
5. *Decision-making* The decision-making category refers to all parental involvement in school governance, which may be through the Parents and Citizens Association or the school board.
6. *Collaborating with the community* There are many forms of school-community collaborations including parenting programs, which may be initiated by the school or outside organisations.

The costs and benefits for schools and school communities of each type of parental engagement have been acknowledged in this phase of the project. These costs and benefits have been examined according to Caldwell's (2006) 'alignment' model, which describes the range of resources available to the school as four types of capital: social capital, intellectual capital, spiritual capital and financial capital. The model has assisted in identifying the ways in which school practices increase parental engagement and can draw from or enhance school resources.

Drawing on national and international studies, this project identified potential barriers to parents becoming more involved in their child's education. We have also located practices that can be used to overcome these barriers. The inclusion of discussions about the costs and benefits of, and barriers and gateways to, parental engagement in schooling offer a greater understanding of the relationship between all types of parental engagement and improved student outcomes. This phase of the review is represented in the following findings:

- *Parenting* Parents' education level, expectations and beliefs about education are important indicators of student success
- *Communication* Effective parent-teacher communication can have benefits for student outcomes, particularly in the early years of schooling
- *Volunteering* Parent volunteering activities that take place in the school have a relationship with decreases in disruptive student behaviour and increases in student motivation, engagement and retention
- *Learning at Home* Parent participation in literacy learning activities has a relationship with improvements in student literacy
- *Decision-Making* Participation in school governance offers parents an opportunity to share ownership of school decisions
- *Collaborating with the Community* There is a positive relationship between improved student outcomes and parenting programs that are sensitive to the cultural needs and values of parents

These and other key findings in the literature review phase of the project have informed the analysis of key implications for policy and practice to enhance parental engagement in Queensland state schools.

4. Examples of Parent Engagement: Queensland Case Studies

The second phase of the project included the preparation of case studies of ten Queensland state schools to provide exemplars of current parental engagement policies and practices used in the Queensland school context. In preparing these case studies, we visited each participating school and conducted interviews or focus group sessions with key stakeholders in the school community, including school leaders, school staff, parents and students.

The findings from these case studies have been organised according to Epstein's model of parental engagement. This provided an opportunity to compare the findings of the literature review, that show the relationship between parental engagement practices to improved student outcomes, to the concrete examples of current practices used in Queensland state schools to enhance parental engagement. The interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders provided further insights into the types of practice that the school community identifies as successful methods of creating greater parent involvement in schools.

These case studies were vital in providing information about parental engagement in the Queensland context. This information has been included in the analysis of key implications for policies and practice to enhance parental engagement.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

We identified the following chief implications for policy and practice to enhance parental engagement in Queensland state schools:

- *Contextual Differences between Schools* Schools are not homogenous organisations, and practices that are successful for enhancing parental engagement in one context may not work in another. The context of individual schools and school communities needs to be acknowledged in the development of practices to enhance parent engagement. We recommend the networking of ideas between schools in order to share involvement strategies and develop best-practice for enhancing parental engagement in the diverse range of school contexts.
- *Variables in Parental Engagement* The levels of parental engagement in school-based activities are higher at the primary level than the secondary level of schooling. Parents' home-based involvement in their children's education, however, is maintained at all levels of the school. High levels of public recognition and praise for all types of parental engagement at all levels, especially for the support of children in secondary schools, may encourage greater involvement.
- *School Choice* Recent Australian research suggests that when parents are active in selecting a school for their child, they are more likely to be involved in school activities. We recommend that the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts maintain the provision for parental choice of school. Processes should also be implemented to make it easier for parents to gain access to valid information to guide their choice of schools.
- *Invitations to Participate* Schools in the case studies reported their success in raising levels of parental engagement by inviting and encouraging individuals to be involved in school activities. Public acknowledgement of the importance of welcoming parents to schools and the use of every means, including appropriate media, can be used to enhance the involvement of parents.
- *School Atmosphere* A welcoming school atmosphere has been found to encourage parental involvement in school activities. Schools should be informed of effective strategies which create a welcoming and friendly school environment, including the incorporation of relevant features in building design and professional development.
- *Effective Home-School Communication* Effective communication is recognised as the most important and valuable form of parental engagement. Many school staff, however, are not trained to effectively communicate with members of a school community, who may come from diverse backgrounds. All educational staff should recognise the importance of effective home-school communication and

implement systems to create and maintain the skills of staff to effectively communicate with members of the school community.

- *Effective Home-School Communication: Barriers* There are a range of barriers to effective communication between schools and parents, including parents not being comfortable at the school site or having limited literacy skills. Many of these barriers can be overcome through the further enhancement of the range of technologies available to schools to ensure that parents receive all relevant information about their children's learning. The use of email communication and posting of information on school websites may assist some schools to effectively communicate with their school community. Where members of the community do not have access to internet technology, schools may be required to use other approaches.
- *Parenting Programs* All research, including our case studies, offered endorsements of the literacy and numeracy programs that include parents. We recommend sustained support for programs that secure the engagement of parents in literacy and numeracy programs. Engaging parents in the community setting for Indigenous students is affirmed.
- *Decision-Making* No evidence has identified a relationship between parental engagement in school decision-making processes and improved student outcomes. There is evidence, however, that parents' involvement in school governance contains benefits for both parents and the school. Public acknowledgement of the benefits of participation in Parents and Citizens Associations and school councils, where the latter exist, could enhance parents' involvement in school decision-making processes. No change to governance arrangements are indicated in research on parent engagement.
- *The Queensland Context* There is limited research on parental engagement in Queensland state schools. We recommend further research to gain a better insight into barriers and gateways to parental engagement in the Queensland context.
- *Community Liaison Officers* Community liaison officers are employed in some Queensland state schools to facilitate relationships between schools and the community, particularly in areas with a large Indigenous population. There is, however, very little research on the efficacy of this role in enhancing parent engagement. Further empirical research is required to gain a greater understanding of the efficacy of the community liaison role, with a particular focus on the role of community liaison officers in Indigenous communities.

Section 1 Introduction

This report explores the findings of research into parental engagement in state schools commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and the Arts of the Queensland Government. The report reflects the two phases of research undertaken by Educational Transformations in the area. The first phase was an intensive review of Queensland, Australian and international research into all forms of parental engagement. Particular attention was paid to research in the last two decades on the relationships between all types of parental involvement and improved student outcomes.

In the second phase, case studies were conducted on the policies and practices to promote parental participation in their students' education in ten Queensland state schools. These case studies offer exemplars of current practice in primary, secondary and combined primary-secondary state schools from metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas in Queensland. Based on interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders, schools' triennial review processes and parent satisfaction data, these case studies link current practice in Queensland schools to the Queensland, Australian and international research findings of the literature review and provide practical examples of how parental engagement can be enhanced in the Queensland setting.

This research recognises that not all school students in Australia live with their biological parents. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 'Family Characteristics' report (2004) indicated that in 2003 over 850 000 children between 5 and 17 years of age had at least one natural parent who did not live with them. In 2003 more than 300 000 children aged between birth and 17 had grandparents as their primary caretakers. Students may live with guardians and other care-givers. It should be noted, therefore, that for the purpose of this research, the terms 'parent' and 'parental' are used to refer to any person who carries out parental responsibilities for school students. In this report, we use the terms 'engagement', 'involvement' and 'participation' interchangeably. The various types of parental engagement that we are examining, however, are defined in accordance with Epstein's (1995) framework of six categories of parental involvement and further clarified within the text as relevant.

Section 1.1 Context of Parental Engagement

Research into the benefits of parental engagement on student outcomes has a long history in the educational field, dating back to the release of the Plowden Report in Britain in 1967. This report introduced the notion that both the family and the school had an influence on students' educational outcomes. Coleman (1988) used the notion of social capital in his examination of the relationship between family or community involvement in schools and student achievement. Social capital, a concept which is generally attributed to Bourdieu (1985), is defined by the World Bank as the networks that people belong to and the resources that they can draw on as a result of these networks (Grootaert, Narayan, Nyhan Jones and Woolcock 2003). Caldwell and Spinks (2008) define social capital as:

the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks involving the school, parents, community, business and industry – indeed, all individuals, agencies, organisations and institutions that have the potential to support and, where appropriate, be supported by the school (Caldwell and Spinks 2008, page 32)

Coleman found that students from schools with high levels of social capital achieved higher outcomes than students from other schools. He found the link between social capital and achievement was particularly strong in church-based schools, which had strong community networks.

Over the past two decades, interest in parental engagement has intensified with research findings having a strong influence on educational policy both in Australia and internationally. In turn, this has influenced education practice with the development of partnership models between parents and schools gaining momentum. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) in the United States and the ‘Every Child Matters’ policy (2003) in England both state the need for high levels of home-school collaboration. A draft family-school partnerships framework (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006) has been developed by the Australian Government, in consultation with the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), the Australian Parents’ Council (APC), Principals’ Associations and government and non-government school authorities throughout Australia. As Dom and Verhoeven have noted, “‘parents’ opinions about the education of their children are being taken more and more seriously and parents are increasingly becoming involved in their children’s education’ (Dom and Verhoeven 2006, page 1). This shift in the focus of educational research and practice to a partnership model between parents and teachers has instated the home as a site which influences the ‘process by creating an atmosphere that fosters or inhibits study’ (Cooper and Valentine 2001).

We have found that most research into the area of parental involvement and its relationship to improved students outcomes is qualitative rather than quantitative. The quantitative research reviewed in this report has found a strong, positive relationship between different types of parental engagement and forms of improved student outcomes (Epstein, Simon and Salinas 1997; Cooper et al. 1998; Simon 2001; Van Voorhis 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002). The research on parental involvement, however, is less clear about the cause and effect of this relationship (Englund et al. 2004).

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive examination of research into all forms of parental engagement. We have provided definitions for all types of parental involvement identified in the literature. We have also offered a detailed overview of each category of parental engagement, including any relationship that has been identified with increased student outcomes. Any gaps, limitations and inconsistencies in the available international, Australian, and Queensland-based literature are highlighted. The focus in Section 3 is on the costs and benefits of increased parental involvement to the school, including both the school’s staff and administration, and to students. Section 4 examines the barriers that that can inhibit parents from becoming involved in their children’s

education and the strategies that schools can use to enhance parental engagement. Finally, this report draws conclusions from the research and suggests policy directions for enhancing parental engagement in Queensland state schools.

Section 1.2 Context of Queensland Schooling and Parental Engagement Activities

The Queensland Government delivers education to approximately 70 per cent of all Queensland school students. More than half of all state schools are located in rural and remote areas. Queensland has a higher proportion of Indigenous students than many other states and territories in Australia.

In Queensland, state education is increasingly being understood as a partnership between parents and schools working together to improve the educational outcomes of students. Under the partnership model, accountability and transparency of school policy and practice are of paramount importance. Parents can access information about schools and educational policy through individual schools and the Department of Education, Training and the Arts. One particular method that parents can obtain information about education policies and procedures in Queensland is through the Education Policy and Procedures Register on the Department's website (*Department of Education, Training and the Arts Policy and Procedures Register*). The provision by schools of an annual report, and the requirement that all state schools deliver a triennial progress and planning report, are further assurances of the Government's commitment to transparency and accountability.

Recent legislation has further cemented the principle of partnership. In 2006, the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* made it a requirement for schools to provide prospective students and their parents with an 'enrolment agreement,' which sets out the mutual rights and obligations of school and home. Under the Act, the school is required to provide each student with a written report about their performance at least twice a year. In addition, the Act recognises the need to involve parents in a closer working relationship with the school and provides for the opportunity of parents meeting with their child's teachers at least twice a year to discuss the educational progress of their children.

The Queensland Government has a strong record of encouraging parental involvement. In 1996, the Regional and Community Relations Unit of the Department of Education, Training and the Arts compiled an overview of parental activities in schools, entitled 'The Role of the School-Based Parent Worker'. In the same year, the state primary school system formed the 'The Inclusive Approach to Parent and Community Participation' and disseminated information about parental involvement through the publication of a number of case studies. In 2000 Education Queensland commissioned a research report into parent and teacher perspectives in Queensland Government schools titled 'Education Matters: Parents, Teachers and Schooling Decisions in Queensland'.

While the Government has a commitment to assisting all parents to become more involved in the education of their children, it is sensitive to the benefits of parenting partnerships in Indigenous communities. Recently, the Queensland Government has developed a number of initiatives designed specifically to increase involvement by Indigenous Australians from Cape York and Torres Strait in the education of their schools. The papers *Bound for Success: Education Strategy for Torres Strait* and *Bound for Success Education Strategy Cape York* were released in 2005 and 2006 and aim to stimulate ideas to overcome the ‘economic and social challenges’ for Indigenous students in far North Queensland (Queensland Government 2005, page 4). The need to work closely with local communities and cultural contexts in the education of Indigenous children is included among the strategic actions which the paper outlines. One such initiative developed in partnership with the Torres Strait Islanders Regional Education Council is ‘Yumi’ education which recognises ‘the specific educational interests of Torres Strait Islanders’ (Queensland Government 2005 page 19).

Section 1.3 *Definitions of Parental Engagement*

Early studies, such as those in the 1960s and 1970s, provided ‘inconsistent and varied findings’ about the impact that parental engagement may have on student outcomes (Harris and Goodall 2006). Some research studies into this area found that parental involvement has a positive effect on student outcomes (for example: Cooper et al. 1998; Epstein, Simon and Salinas 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002). Other studies found that some types of parental involvement have little or no effect on students’ academic achievements (for example: Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Fan and Chen 1999). A number of researchers have suggested that the inconsistencies in these findings may be attributed to the variations in the definitions of ‘parental engagement’ used in these research studies (Harris and Goodall 2006; Majoribanks 1995).

One of the most difficult factors in reviewing the research in the area of parental engagement in schools is the lack of a consistent and coherent definition of the activities encompassed by the terms ‘engagement’. In this literature review, we found that studies use terms like ‘parental engagement’, ‘parental involvement’, ‘parental participation’ and ‘home-school partnerships’ to describe one or more of a diverse range of actions, activities and attitudes that connect homes and schools. The diverse behaviours that are described as ‘parental involvement’ within the research include any and all types of written and verbal communication between the home and the school (Quigley 2000), parents assisting their children with homework tasks (Deslandes and Bertrand 2005; Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001; Jeynes 2005), parents volunteering both in the classroom and with activities for the school (Epstein and Dauber 1991) or parents’ attitudes about education (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Researchers may focus on only one of these possible activities, whilst still referring to the activity by the umbrella term ‘parental engagement’. Keith and Keith (1993) have indicated that parents who are engaged in their child’s schooling through one type of activity may not be involved in other ways. Researchers should not, therefore, assume that a parent who assists with school governance also assists with their child’s homework.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests the influence of parental involvement on student outcomes is related to the type of activity in which parents engage. For example, while there is a relatively strong research base that states that parents' assistance of their children at home is closely related to cognitive achievement, there is little evidence to support the idea that parental involvement on school boards has the same relationship (Harris and Goodall 2006). International parent engagement literature further suggests 'different kinds of parent involvement are effective at different times during the students' life' (Henderson and Mapp 2002, page 511). It is therefore highly important for studies to provide clear explanations of the type of activities on which they are focussed. Grolnick and Slowiaczek suggested that 'it is important to clarify the types of parental involvement of interest and, where possible, to include multiple indices' (cited in Majoribanks 1995, page 73). The importance of clarifying the types of activities being examined is highlighted when research findings are being compared. Without the explanation of what activities are being studied, one cannot make valid and meaningful comparisons between studies. The lack of clear descriptions of the activities being researched in these studies 'creates a challenge for those who seek models that are practicable and yield measurable results' (Jordan, Orozco and Averett 2001, page 7).

The movement towards using multiple indices or activities is evident in many studies of parental engagement (e.g. Dornbusch and Glasgow 1996; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jordan, Orozco and Averett 2001). In studies using multiple indices, it is vital that the studies clearly indicate all types of parental engagement activities that are examined in their research. Some studies, such as Crosnoe (2001), include multiple indices of parental involvement in their collection of data, but only offer an average of these results and do not examine the outcomes associated with individual types of parental involvement. In response to this need for clarification, and the wide range of behaviours under the parental involvement umbrella, many studies have developed models to assist in defining the various types of activities that may be involved (e.g. Barton 1992; Epstein 1995; Fraser 1994; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). The models of parent involvement activities attempt to narrow the field of behaviours in order to describe each of these activities more accurately.

Section 1.4 *Models of Parental Engagement*

One simple model that has been used by researchers is the dual classification of activities as either involvement or participation, which has predominantly been used by researchers in the Australian context (e.g. Barton 1992). Fraser notes that, according to this model, 'involvement usually means helping, while participation is restricted to taking part in policy decision-making' (Fraser 1994, page 4). Reeve notes that the involvement-participation dichotomy and these definitions were supported by parent groups, government school supporters and some state school systems in Australia in the early 1990s (Reeve 1993, page 4). The problem with this model of parental engagement, however, is that the definitions of these terms were not used consistently by researchers. In addition, international researchers using the involvement-participation model tended to define the categories more flexibly. The lack of consistent definitions of participation and involvement meant that researchers were unable to convincingly compare their findings.

Furthermore, the dual system of classification meant that there was still quite a large range of activities that could be included in each category. The activities that could be included in the participation category, according to the definition we have given, were restricted to parents being active in the decision-making processes or governance of the school. The involvement category, on the other hand, still encompassed all forms of parental helping, which could include a variety of actions like helping students with homework or helping the school through fundraising activities.

One of the most widely used classifications in studies of parental engagement is Epstein's (1987; 1995) framework. In 1987 Epstein created a system that included four different categories of parental involvement activities. This system was expanded to include two further categories and has since been used in numerous research studies, particularly meta-analyses and literature reviews, to organise the wealth of information on parental engagement. Epstein's (1995) model is a more detailed framework that uses six classifications of behaviours. These categories include:

1. *Parenting* This category is defined as 'the basic obligations of the family, such as establishing positive home conditions to encourage school success' (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding and Walberg (Eds.) 2005). This may include activities like parents discussing school with their children or providing an environment to assist their children with performing tasks for their schooling.
2. *Communicating* This category includes all forms of communication between parents and the school. Two sub-categories of communication may be added to this model including structured and un-structured communication. Structured communication refers to school activities, such the provision of school reports, school newsletters and parent-teacher interviews. Unstructured communication, on the other hand, may refer to more informal conversations between teachers and parents about student's schooling.
3. *Volunteering* This category refers to parents acting as volunteers for the school, which may be directly related to classroom activities, like reading programs or acting as teacher aides or may be related to more general school activities, such as fundraising activities.
4. *Learning at home* The fourth category describes parent assistance that is provided to their children with school-initiated activities in the home. This can refer to homework or other activities that schools set for students to complete at home.

5. *Decision-making* The decision-making category refers to all parental involvement in school governance, which may be through the Parents and Citizens Association or the School Board.
6. *Collaborating With the community* This category refers to the school's use of their social networks and resources to assist parents with their children's education. School-initiated parenting programs, which are legislated in some states in the United States of America may be included in this category.

Section 1.5 Methodology of Literature Review

The aim of this literature review was to include high-quality, robust, qualitative and quantitative research studies on parental engagement, with a particular focus on the context of Queensland schooling. This review examines research studies and meta-analytic studies that demonstrate high levels of rigour and research quality for all forms of parental engagement. Initially, research studies were located through a variety of search strategies, including but not limited to the use of parents' organisations, Australian Federal and State Government Websites, information from key education stakeholders and education research databases to source published and unpublished research materials. The preliminary search strategy included the following terms:

- Parent OR carer OR family OR home
- Support OR partnership OR involvement OR engagement OR inclusion OR relationship OR participation OR contribution OR commitment
- School OR education OR class OR classroom OR homework OR school work OR teacher OR principal OR secondary school OR primary school OR elementary school OR students OR pupils

For further information on more specific aspects of this project the following variables were used:

- Student achievement OR student outcomes OR student learning OR improved learning OR educational achievement OR literacy learning OR numeracy learning OR school improvement OR classroom behaviour OR school retention OR absenteeism
- Improvement OR enhancement OR development OR increase OR programs OR processes OR school activities OR activities OR costs OR benefits OR barriers

Several subject terms were identified in early scans of research databases including:

- Family-School partnerships
- Home-School partnerships
- Home-School relationships
- Parent – Teacher relationships

All relevant research studies located in the preliminary literature search were reviewed by researchers at Educational Transformations, to assess the appropriateness of methods used and the quality and rigour of the research. The questions asked in the review of identified research included the following:

- What was the methodology used for this research?
- Was the methodology appropriate for the research topic?
- Did the studies provide sufficient evidence for their findings or was this opinion?
- What is the size of the cohort examined in this study?
- Has this research been cited by other studies?

The first three questions, regarding the identification and evaluation of the research methodology and the evidence base for each study, were addressed in the preliminary identification of research into parental engagement. This preliminary search located a large number of research studies, particularly studies from the United States and United Kingdom. Studies that were identified as using appropriate methods and offered sufficient evidence for their findings were included in the second stage of the research review. Studies that offered opinions or insufficient evidence for their findings were excluded at this preliminary stage.

The purpose of this literature review was to provide a strong evidence base for future policy, legislation or service delivery reforms regarding parental engagement activities in Queensland schools. In accordance with this purpose, the research on parental engagement that had been identified and reviewed in the preliminary literature search was further refined in three ways. First, in order to provide a robust examination of research on parental engagement that was relevant to the Queensland context, all high quality Australian and Queensland studies were included in the literature review. Although there was recognition of the importance of qualitative research studies for the enhancement of parental engagement in schools, this literature review aimed to provide a strong evidence base through the inclusion of robust quantitative studies. The second stage of the research review, therefore, included an examination of the quantitative studies identified in the preliminary search, such as a review of the number of participants in the studies to assess whether or not it was possible to generalise from the findings. The sample sizes of quantitative studies have been specified in the literature review. Finally, researchers reviewed the references used in all research and meta-analytic studies on parental engagement to ensure that all seminal research papers had been included in this literature review.

Studies that were identified as including relevant findings from high-quality, rigorous research were included in this review. Any studies that did not provide sufficient evidence for their findings or did not meet the research criteria described above were excluded.

Section 2 Relationships between All Types of Parental Engagement and Student Outcomes.

The second section of this literature review uses Epstein's (1995) categories to organise the large bodies of literature on each type of parental engagement. Whilst Epstein's comprehensive framework has been designed to assist in an in-depth examination of all types of parental involvement, each category may still include a number of activities. For this reason, we provide further clarification of the individual actions undertaken by parents that are collectively grouped in this model. For example, Epstein's second type of involvement, *communication*, has been broken into actions such as formal parent-teacher interviews, school reporting practices and informal communication between parents and teachers. Within our review of the existing Queensland, Australian and international literature, we found that many studies examined more than one parental engagement activity. Our aim to provide an in-depth analysis of literature on each action included in the Epstein categories has meant that the repeated reference to some studies is unavoidable.

The focus of this section is on the relationship between student outcomes and each type of parental engagement. This section also notes any gaps, limitations and inconsistencies in the available literature, which are discussed further section 5.2 of this report.

The term 'student outcomes' is used in this project to refer to all forms of outcomes including, but not limited to, students' academic achievements. Research has shown that parental involvement activities may result in improvements in student engagement (e.g. Feiler et al. 2000), student retention (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999), motivation (Cuttance and Stokes 2000) classroom behaviour and academic achievement (e.g. Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004; Fan and Chen 1999; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Keith and Keith 1993). Numerous studies found positive relationships between parental engagement and student achievement in literacy and numeracy (Cairney 2000; Goos et al. 2007; Jones and White 2000; Pezdek, Barry and Renno 2002; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). Other studies found positive effects of parental outcomes on student achievement in other subject areas such as art, science, social studies and language arts, a subject that would be described as 'English' in Australian schools (Jordan, Orozco and Avarett 2001). Our examinations include descriptions of the relationships identified by research studies between each type of parental engagement and student outcomes.

Section 2.1 Parenting

The 'parenting' category as defined by Epstein refers to child-rearing, parents' beliefs and expectations regarding education, the physical dimension of creating an environment in which children can study and parental choice of educational institutions for their child. Although it offers a useful categorisation of activities, Epstein's model makes no allowance for the complicated relationships between parents' motivation, beliefs and

expectations and student outcomes which have been the recent and concentrated subject of investigation by Hoover-Dempsey and her associates (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Whereas beliefs about education doubtlessly influence behaviour, it is difficult to reliably test these associations. While research has found a positive relationship between the broad concepts of parental involvement at home with improved student outcomes, the area in which students showed most improvement was in their attitudes towards schooling rather than their academic achievement.

Although the 'parenting' category in Epstein's (1995) framework embraces disparate behaviours, research on 'parenting' has focused largely on beliefs, expectations and school choice. Research shows that involved parents are motivated by feelings of obligation and high levels of self-efficacy, a belief that one's actions are effective. Walker et al. indicate that 'parents become involved in their child's education because they think they *should*' (Walker et al. 2004, page 1). Moreover, these researchers argue that parents 'become involved out of a belief that their involvement will make a positive difference in their children's learning' (Walker et al. 2004, page 1). While parents' attitudes towards education govern all aspects of parental involvement, the home environment offers an important opportunity to isolate their attitudes and expectations from outside influences. It is, therefore, interesting to observe that very few studies have done so. Although research into the influence of parents' attitudes and expectations have not been isolated to the home or school sites, there is agreement among researchers that high parental expectations are the single most important indicator of high-achieving students (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Shumow and Miller 2001; Walker et al. 2004).

An English study has found that social class may be a determining influence on parental expectations and on student educational outcomes. In Crozier's (1997) study of parental views, drawn from data collected through questionnaires and interviews, he found a marked difference between what he termed the aspirations of working class and middle class parents. While Crozier acknowledged that his use of the term 'working class' is 'problematic' (Crozier 1997, unpaginated), socioeconomic status does not account for other factors traditionally associated with social class, such as low educational levels and low expectations which may influence parental involvement. Crozier's definition of social class was based on information supplied by parents on their education, qualifications, housing status and occupation. The study found that 'working class' parents were found to lack a clear 'vision of their child's future' (Crozier 1997, unpaginated) while middle class parents had a clearer picture of what they expected of their children and had a stronger understanding and knowledge of the channels, such as tertiary education, that would enable them to achieve these expectations. Although working class parents were found by Crozier (1997) to be more passive when it came to their expectations of their children, no statistical data was supplied in the study to support this finding.

Overall, research that has used parents' educational levels as a variable in data collection has consistently shown that the higher the educational level of the parent the more likely the child is to succeed academically (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Keith et al. 1996;

Shumow and Miller 2001). These findings are further supported by a longitudinal research project performed by Englund et al. (2004), which found a positive relationship between high maternal educational levels and student achievement in early primary school.

Research into parental expectations has noted an important difference between parents' activities which involve them in their children's education and parents' expectations. As noted by Englund et al. 'parental expectations appear to be different from other definitions of parental involvement in that parental expectations are beliefs' (Englund et al. 2004, page 3) What is not pursued by Englund et al., however, are the challenges involved in measuring for beliefs. Research in this area has been largely reliant on parental self-reporting of their beliefs and expectations. Self-reports must be used with caution as research has shown a significant level of difference between the reports of parental involvement given by parents, teachers, principals and students (Henderson and Mapp 2002).

Parental choice over where they send their children to school and the effect of choice on student achievement is another form of parental engagement which is attracting increasing research attention both in Australia and internationally (Buckingham 2001; Caldwell and Roskam 2002; Hoxby 2001; Lindsay 2004; Macintosh and Wilkinson 2006; McGaw 2006; Novak 2006; Ryan and Watson 2004; Whitty 1997). In Australia, the range of schools which a parent may potentially chose from include: comprehensive public, selective public, non-secular private schools, Catholic, Christian, and the increasingly wide selection of non-Christian religious schools. It has been claimed that: 'Parents, above all, want choice...They want choice between a range of quality education options. They want choice between a strong independent sector and a strong government sector. But parents also want, and students deserve, choices within these sectors' (Field 2004). In Australia and internationally, however, there is intense debate over the educational benefits of parental choice and the competition it encourages between schools. Opponents of choice raise concerns about reputed high performing schools 'skimming' off the high achieving students from government schools. In the context of work done on peer influence, this may further disadvantage students in the most vulnerable and challenging circumstances (Macintosh and Wilkinson 2006; Whitty 1997). Advocates for choice argue that competition between schools can raise achievement across all schools (Caldwell and Roskam 2002; Hoxby 2001). A review of the literature reveals, however, that the majority of empirical studies of parental choice have been conducted in the United States,

Quantitative studies from the United States into the educational benefits of parental choice have focused largely on the voucher system that enables disadvantaged children to attend private schools. Figlio and Stone (1997) found that in the area of mathematic achievement there was some evidence to support the claim that attending Catholic schools improves student achievement. When compared with Catholic students attending government schools in year 8, the achievement of Catholic students attending Catholic schools was found to be three per cent higher. Findings by Figlio and Stone (1997) are further supported by a Queensland study performed by Nguyen, Taylor and Bradley

(2005), which found that Catholic students had higher levels of achievement in mathematics than non-Catholic students. At year 12 level Catholic students' test scores for mathematics were 10 per cent higher than government school students. The study also found that the effect for mathematics were stronger in males than for females (Nguyen, Taylor and Bradley 2005). Furthermore, the study showed that attending a Catholic school raised the probability of completing year 12 by 7 per cent and the probability of enrolling in tertiary study by 14 per cent.

A study by Hoxby (2001) from the United States focused on whether the competition between schools, which has been encouraged by educational reforms, improves achievement for all schools. Results were drawn from fourth grade tests of a large sample group which included students from Milwaukee and Wisconsin who were and were not involved in voucher programs. Hoxby found that in the area of mathematics achievement students in the voucher programs across schools improved their test results by 3.5 points. The study, however, did not factor in other variables, such as teacher quality, which might also account for the improvement in student achievement.

More recently, a six year longitudinal study by Plucker et al. (2006) examined the effects of the voucher system on the achievement of students who began kindergarten in 1998-1999 and completed primary school in 2003-2004 in Cleveland. The study drew its sample from 4000 students and 100 schools and began in 1998 with the inception of the voucher system known as the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program. Data for student achievement was drawn from tests performed by the researchers on the students and information collected in the classrooms. While overall the study found no statistical difference between the achievement of the students involved in the voucher system and the comparative groups of public school students, there were subject specific differences. Students in the voucher program had higher results in language and social studies than their public school counterparts. The study found that students in the voucher program improved their achievement in language (0.29 standard deviation) and social science (0.31 standard deviation). There was, however, no difference in mathematics achievement between these student groups. This study controlled for minority status, family characteristics and prior achievement in order to examine the possible reasons behind the differences in achievement of students in the voucher system and those in public schools. Plucker et al. (2006) found that minority students were less likely to obtain scholarships and that those who did were more likely to drop out of the program. The study further found that low achieving students were also unlikely to complete the program.

Examining the effect of parental choice on education in England, the United States and New Zealand, Whitty noted that 'evidence from one national context is increasingly being mobilised and recontextualised in another' (Whitty 1997, page 4). There are significant differences between the Australian and the U.S. education system that needs to be taken into account before international research can be meaningfully applied. McGaw (2006) reveals that 90 per cent of students in the United States attend government schools as opposed to 60 per cent of students in public education in Australia. The issue of whether vouchers increase or decrease equity in a population with

socioeconomic diversity is central to the Australian debate about parental choice and its impact on student outcomes (Buckingham 2001; Caldwell and Roskam 2002; Macintosh and Wilkinson 2006; Ryan and Watson 2004). There are, however, essential differences between the American and the Australian concepts of a voucher system. While the American voucher system fully funds places for disadvantaged students in private schools, Australian proposals for voucher systems take it for granted that parents will continue make a contribution (Buckingham 2001). As Whitty (1997) cautions, such cultural differences compromise the relevance of importing research from the United States.

Voucher systems, however, are not the only means through which parents are able to exercise choice in selecting a school for their child. As Field (2004) has noted, parents also want choice between schools in the same educational sector. A recent study, conducted by the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training suggests that parents who are actively involved in selecting their child's school report higher levels of satisfaction with the school than other parents (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007).

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: PARENTING

- There is general agreement among researchers that parenting expectations and beliefs about education influence their involvement in their children's education and are important indicators of student success.
- Research has found that the education level of parents is a reliable indicator of their involvement in their child's education level and of student outcomes.
- School choice is a form of parental involvement. While some research has found a positive relationship between school choice and improved student achievement more research is needed to further explain this effect.
- More research is required to examine the effects of school choice on student outcomes in an Australian, and specifically a Queensland, context.

Section 2.2 Communication

The second type of parental involvement activities noted in Epstein's model includes all forms of communication between the home and the school. Communication between school and home is vital to almost all forms of parental involvement. It is only through contact with the school, or members of the school community that parents receive information about the ways in which they can assist the school and, as a result, the education of their children. The importance of communication is highlighted in an Australian study (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006) where more than one quarter of parents surveyed (26 per cent) spontaneously reported that the reason that they had not

participated in certain school activities was a lack of effective communication from the school, despite the survey not including any questions about home-school communication. The high level of unprompted responses about communication is one reason that the research describes communication as the ‘single most important factor in getting parents engaged’ (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22). Similarly, in their study from the United States, Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros have described high levels of communication as ‘essential for improving other types of involvement’ (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999, page 15).

Home-school communication may be structured by the school body, such as parent-teacher interviews or school newsletters, or through less formalised channels, including a casual chat between parents and teachers. We examined the structured and unstructured forms of communication in order to provide a distinction between these two different forms. Structured communication is initiated and directed by the school, whereas unstructured communication can be directed by either party. An examination of the findings of research on the various forms of communication suggests that communication that can be initiated and directed by both parents and school staff is more effective than school-directed forms. Although there are no studies that provide direct comparisons between these forms of communication, described here as ‘structured’ and ‘unstructured’, this finding from the international and Australian research is supported by the research for the Australian Department for Education, Science and Training into family-school partnerships. One of the key findings of this project was described in the following statement:

Effective forms of two-way communication between school and home are central to the successful development of family-school partnerships. Communication needs to change from occasional, one-way and socio-culturally homogenous communication to frequent, two-way and culturally sensitive interaction. It requires much more than informing parents by the school newsletter. (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22)

Structured Communication

Communication activities between home and school can be structured by the school in the form of parent-teacher interviews or regulated by the government, in the case of student reports. In 2004, the Queensland Government released a consultation paper that outlined a range of proposals for the improvement of school reporting to parents, students and the wider community (Queensland Government 2004). In response to the community feedback on these proposals, the Queensland Government implemented changes to school reporting. From 2005, all Queensland schools were required to publish information about the school, including the school’s curriculum, the extra-curricular activities offered to students and the opportunities for parents to become involved in school activities. Schools were also required to provide information about students’ outcomes, such as the retention rates of students and information about students’ achievements in literacy and numeracy tests. In addition to the Queensland Government’s

changes to school reporting, the Australian Government issued regulations on school reports as one of the conditions for the Commonwealth funding of schools for the 2005-2008 funding quadrennium (Australian Government 2005). These regulations state that all schools are required to supply parents with a report of their child's achievement which 'must specify, for each program year, a required framework for relative and comparative reporting of a child's progress and achievement against the performance of the child's peer group at the school' (Australian Government 2005, page 6).

During the development of this regulation, a research study was commissioned to examine the practice of providing school reports. The Australian study by Cuttance and Stokes (2000) is one of very few sources that provide information about the purpose and perceptions of student reports. Cuttance and Stokes (2000) found that student reports are one of the most common methods used by schools to provide parents with information about the progress of their children. Despite the frequency with which schools provide student reports, the study by Cuttance and Stokes (2000) is the only research that focuses directly on the question of school and student reporting. This study found that parents expect reports to include a range of information about their child's academic achievements and other outcomes. Cuttance and Stokes found that 'parents need to know how well their children are achieving against specific learning standards, the progress they are making, and how well they are achieving compared to their peers' (2000, page 98). They also suggested that written student reports must be provided in a clear format using easily understandable language in order for the information to be of any relevance to parents in supporting their child's education. Finally, Cuttance and Stokes (2000) found that written student reports alone do not provide parents with all the required information on their child's progress. Australian parents who participated in their study indicated that they would like to be contacted outside the structured student report period to receive information about any problems that their child may be experiencing at school.

An additional requirement included in the Schools Assistance Regulation, is that all Australian schools must make an annual school report available to the public (Australian Government 2005). These annual school reports include information about student attendance and school student achievement in standardised tests, such as the grade 3, 5 and 7 literacy and numeracy tests. The school achievement data may be presented as an individual document or be incorporated with other information about the school's values, programs and facilities in the school's prospectus. Parents should be able to access this report to gain further information about their child's school or, when choosing a school for their child, to compare the outcomes of many schools. As the standardised requirements for school and student reporting have only been in place in Australian schools since 2005, there has been no research that examines the effectiveness of these reports as a form of structured home-school communication.

Other frequently used methods of communication include the school's newsletter or website. Many schools regularly use these methods to provide parents with up-to-date information about activities and programs. Despite the prevalence of schools using newsletters, there is little international or Australian research to show the impact that this method of communication may have on student outcomes. Research indicates that parents

respond positively to receiving information about their child's schooling (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Henderson and Mapp 2002). In one study from the United States, 90 per cent of families reported that they read school newsletters (Gotts 1983, cited in Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999). These reports, however, may not provide an accurate view of the use of school newsletters. One study of school's websites in England noted that there was a significant discrepancy between the number of parents who reported accessing the website for information about the school and the number of visitors recorded on the website's log (Somekh, Mavers and Lewin 2001, cited in Jenkins 2006).

School newsletters and websites are directed by the school and do not necessarily offer all of the information that families would like. A number of Australian and international research studies have found that parents would like more information about the school curriculum and ways to assist their children when they are having problems at school (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). School newsletters and websites may also be difficult to understand for members of the school community who have limited literacy or computer skills. Australian school newsletters and websites may also pose difficulties for parents who do not speak English as a first language unless, like one school described in our case studies, the website is provided in alternative languages. The difficulties in effectively providing information through school newsletters and websites have been noted by one Australian study, which states that 'The newsletter is never enough. The appointment of a parent liaison officer is a very useful initiative (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22).

Parent liaison officers are members of the school staff who are employed to build 'a positive partnership between home and school in order to support children's development and learning' (Turnbull, Ryan and Long 2006, page 1). Parent liaisons, also known as community liaison officers or home-school liaison officers depending on the setting, may also facilitate communication between school staff and liaise with organisations in the wider community (Long, Ryan and Turnbull 2006). A number of schools throughout the world are employing parent liaison officers to increase their contact with parents and members of the community. At present, the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts employs community participation officers, while schools have the ability to employ community and parent liaison officers and Indigenous community liaison officers. Schools in England are using 'home-school liaison officers' in a response to the community-schools relationships described in the 'Every Child Matters' policy. In Mauritius, parent liaison officers have been employed in the Zones d'Education Prioritaires (ZEP) program, which involves schools in the most challenging socioeconomic circumstances throughout the island (Panday 2006). Recent Australian research has also highlighted the benefits of using parent liaison officers, particularly in Indigenous settings (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). This study indicates that:

in Indigenous settings, the introduction of Aboriginal Education Workers (or those with equivalent titles and functions in the various States), or of Indigenous parents into active roles in the school have been shown to be

effective ways of creating a sense of cultural inclusiveness (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006; page 15).

Despite the recommendations for schools to employ parent liaison officers, there is little evidence on the efficacy of this position in enhancing parent-school communication and parental involvement. The available research in this area is primarily based on opinion and anecdotal evidence of the work parent liaison officers do to strengthen communication and cultural and community inclusiveness. These outcomes, however, are intangible and difficult to objectively measure. While the use of parent liaison officers is reported to enhance communication, cultural understanding and community participation in schools, more research is required in this area.

In addition to student reports and school newsletters, one of the most frequent forms of structured home-school communication is the use of parent-teacher interviews. Parents are invited to the school at a set time period to meet with their child's teacher(s) and discuss their child's performance in the school. As noted previously, communication between the home and school is described as 'essential' for increasing parents' and teachers' knowledge of the student and for enhancing other types of parental engagement (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999). Although parent-teacher interviews provide an opportunity for both parties to interact, these interviews take place intermittently at a time and place that is set by the school, which may raise a number of barriers to parental involvement. Harris and Goodall state that 'parents' evenings are a particularly well documented site for creating parental frustration and confusion' (Harris and Goodall 2006, unpaginated). Although the parent-teacher interviews provide a designated time and location for home-school communication, there is no assurance that this communication will be as effective as possible or valuable for all participants. Parents may be unable to attend the interviews at the designated time and place for a number of reasons.

Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) indicate that the organisation of secondary schools, where students have a teacher for every subject, may create a challenge for effective communication at parent-teacher interviews. Parents of secondary students may be required to meet with up to seven different subject teachers. Secondary teachers, on the other hand, may teach their subject to approximately one hundred or more students. They would not, therefore, have as much information about individual students as parents had received from classroom teachers in primary schools, who teach their subject to around 30 students. Furthermore, interaction may be difficult between parents and teachers from different cultural or language backgrounds. For these reasons, Australian research has suggested that home-school interaction 'needs to change from occasional, one-way and socio-culturally homogenous communication to frequent, two-way and culturally sensitive interaction' (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22).

International research has shown that parents may avoid interacting with their child's teachers and participating in these interviews for a number of reasons. Some parents have perceptions of teachers as being superior and enforcing their attitudes and beliefs on parents (Crozier 1997; Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004). Darch, Miao and Shippen (2004)

further state that some parents, particularly parents of children with behaviour and learning difficulties, do not attend parent-teacher interviews as they do not want to hear negative information from their child's teacher. Parents also often feel that their opinions, concerns and suggestions are not always taken into account by teachers, who 'engage with parents only on their own terms' (Harris and Goodall 2006, unpaginated). Crozier (1997) indicates that some parents' negative perceptions of teachers may discourage them from participating in a partnership for their child's education. While research states that these perceptions and issues of power may inhibit parents from being involved in parent-teacher interviews, there is little research to show what can be done to overcome these barriers. More evidence is required to demonstrate how parents' perceptions of teachers as distant, superior and unwilling to change their methods can be changed.

Unstructured Communication

Most of the research into parent-teacher communication is focused on interaction that is not governed by the school organisation in the same way as school newsletters or designated parent-teacher interviews. Unlike these more formalised communication strategies, unstructured communication may be initiated by either the parent or the teacher at any stage of a student's education. As with all forms of communication, this research has shown that it is important to examine both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of contact between parents and teachers (Kohl et al. 2000). That is, researchers need to not only look at how often teachers and parents interact but also the content and quality of those interactions.

The importance of using both quantitative and qualitative methods has been highlighted in research into the relationship between parent-teacher interaction and student outcomes, although it is important in all research on parental engagement. Quantitative analyses have shown that frequent contact between teachers and parents was negatively associated with student outcomes, although the size of this statistical relationship is not provided (e.g. Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004; Fan and Chen 1999; Henderson and Mapp 2002). Students whose parents communicated with their teachers were more likely to display learning or behavioural difficulties (Crosnoe 2001; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001) or have lower achievement in tests and school results (Fan and Chen 1999). While the negative findings are interesting, they can be explained by the fact that many parents only contact the school when their children encounter difficulties.

The identification of correlations between examined items is accepted as a reliable method in educational research (Boethel 2003). Using statistical correlations in research into parental involvement, however, has two fundamental drawbacks. The first issue to be noted with this method is that the data used in the statistical analysis in these cases are collected through self-reporting surveys. The examination of survey data and self-reports should be approached with caution in many areas, including the area of parental involvement in schools. Research in this area has suggested that there is 'considerable variation amongst parents', teachers' and children's reports of parental involvement activities' (Jones and White 2000, page 80; see also Boethel 2003). When asked to report on their participation in their children's education, parents may report the kinds of

engagement which they aspire to rather than the practices in which they are currently involved. The use of surveys in this research is also one area that should be approached with some caution. Numerous survey-based studies do not provide the reader with the questions that they have used in their data collection (for example, Crosnoe 2001; Dorfman and Fisher 2002; McBride and Schoppe-Sullivan 2005; Quigley 2000). As readers, therefore, we are unable to determine whether certain research studies have examined all types of parental involvement or the forms of survey questions used to elicit responses.

The second drawback of examining statistical correlations is that they do not provide the cause and effect of the relationships that are identified. For example, while statistical evaluations have been used to demonstrate a relationship between the frequency of parent-teacher contact and lower levels of students' academic achievement, these methods do not indicate why this relationship occurs. A number of researchers have used qualitative methods to determine explanations for the negative correlation between parent-teacher contact and student outcomes by examining what is happening within and around this communication. These studies have indicated that the relationship between parent-teacher communication and lower levels of student achievement is highlighted when the interaction is initiated by the parent (Fan and Chen 1999; Henderson and Mapp 2002). It has been suggested that contact between teachers and parents is more frequent when the student in question has been identified as having problems with learning or behaviour (Catsambis 2001; Crosnoe, 2001; Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001). Darch, Miao and Shippen state that some parents are only asked to be involved in their child's schooling when these learning or behaviour problems occur (Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004, page 2). Research into this area further indicates that parents are less likely to communicate with the school when they are satisfied with their child's progress (Crosnoe 2001; Crozier 1997).

While these explanations for the negative relationship between parent-teacher communication and student outcomes seem plausible, most researchers have not provided any evidence to support the hypothesis that parents are more likely to contact the school when their children are having difficulties. Only one study has documented research that has been carried out to further examine the negative statistical correlation that was identified between parent-teacher contact and student achievement in a large sample of around 13,500 secondary school students in the United States. After identifying this correlation in her study, Catsambis (2001) re-examined the data and controlled for students demonstrating 'problem behaviour', such as not being prepared for or not attending classes. When controlling for these students, Catsambis found that there was no longer a correlation between parent-teacher contact and lower student achievement (Catsambis 1998, cited in Henderson and Mapp 2002; also Catsambis 2001). Catsambis' (2001) study supports the findings of other research into parent-teacher communication and has conclusively shown that parents of students with problem behaviour are more likely to be in contact with the school and receive lower grades. Catsambis provides a more solid source of information than other studies which do not test possible explanations for this negative correlation (for example, Crosnoe 2001; Darch Miao and Shippen 2004; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Fan and Chen 1999).

While frequent home-school communication has been found to have a negative relationship with student outcomes, research has also suggested that parent-teacher contact may lead to improved student outcomes in certain areas. Studies in the area of early childhood education has indicated that effective communication between parents and teachers has a positive effect on children's cognitive and social development, which may in turn affect their achievements in a school setting (Hughes and MacNaughton 2001). Research from all levels of school education has indicated that home-school contact can provide parents with information about how to support their children's learning (for example: Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Hughes and MacNaughton 2001; Kelly 2001; Knopf and Swick 2007). Henderson and Mapp (2002) describe a study, prepared for the United States Department of Education, which shows that teachers' communication with parents of low-performing students was related to significant improvements in students' achievements in literacy and mathematics. The test results in schools where teachers reported high levels of contact with parents were 40 per cent higher than results from schools where teachers reported low levels of 'outreach' to parents (Henderson and Mapp 2002, page 28). These results have been supported by Darch, Miao and Shippen (2004) who believe that teachers may also benefit from effective home-school communication as knowledge about students' parents and parenting practices may assist them in better understanding students' behaviour.

Parents who have regular contact with their children's school are more likely to be informed about opportunities being offered by the school, including special classes and activities (Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001). A case study of one school indicated that by sharing knowledge about their children's interests, parents assist teachers in planning lessons that are aligned with the interests of their students and, therefore, increase student engagement (Feiler et al. 2006). Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros (1999) indicate that high school students were more likely to enrol in tertiary education courses when parents, teachers and students communicated about schooling and post-secondary paths.

While research has shown positive outcomes of communication at all levels of schooling, the organisation of schools may have an effect on the levels of parent-teacher communication that takes place. Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) report that the organisational structure of secondary or middle schools is one factor that creates a challenge for effective communication between teachers and parents. As previously noted, subject teachers at the secondary or middle school level teach a far greater number of students each year than primary classroom teachers, who typically teach the same class of students each day. This could also be said for specific-subject teachers in primary schools, who teach one subject to a range of students. Dornbusch and Glasgow state that achieving the same level of contact as occurs with primary classroom teachers would be 'an overwhelming task' for subject teachers (1996, page 36). This finding supports Eccles and Harold's (1996) research that indicates that the structure of students' schooling is more likely to be associated with differences in the level of parental involvement than the students' grade level or age. The structural organisation, therefore, may be one factor in the decline in parental involvement that occurs in secondary education (Mji and Mbinda 2005). Subject teachers may simply not have the time or the information about individual students to maintain frequent contact with parents.

Some studies have found, however, that the amount of contact between parents and teachers is not as important as the quality and effectiveness of that communication. Kohl et al. (1994) reported that ‘the quality of the parent-teacher relationship was more strongly associated with positive child outcomes than was the amount of involvement’ (cited in Kohl et al. 2000, page 517). This study does not describe a method that may be used to measure the quality or effectiveness of communication. Kohl et al., however, state that students should benefit from parent-teacher relationships where both parties ‘feel that they are working towards the same goals and can speak openly and honestly’ (Kohl et al. 2000, page 517). Positive parent-teacher relationships are also found to have an influence on other parental involvement activities, including parental volunteering in the classroom and parental attitudes about school (Kohl et al. 2000). A recent Australian study has suggested that a lack of effective communication between schools and home is creating a barrier for parental involvement (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22). The findings of this study highlight the importance of improving home-school communication for increasing parental engagement and promote the use of home-school liaison officers. The study does not, however, provide any evaluation of the methods suggested to improve communication between the school and members of the school community.

In order for communication to be considered effective, teachers and parents need to be able to convey the required information in a way that is understood by both parties. This task is obviously made more difficult when parents or teachers do not speak English at home, which was the situation for over 13 per cent of people in Queensland in 2001 (ABS Census 2001). Hughes and MacNaughton (2001) state that communication between parents and teachers is viewed as problematic in Australia and other countries with an ethnically diverse population. They indicate that teaching staff need to be adequately trained in order to effectively communicate with parents from all backgrounds. In addition to language barriers, research has discovered a relationship between parents’ levels of education and their reported willingness to contact the school. Parents with higher levels of education were more likely to report feeling comfortable discussing their children’s schooling with teachers (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Kelly 2001; Kohl et al. 2000). Research from the United States has shown that the ethnicity of parents and prevalence of maternal depression may also have an effect on the frequency of communication between teachers and parents (Kohl et al. 2000). These challenges to parental involvement are examined further in Section 4 of this report.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: COMMUNICATION

- Australian research has indicated that parents would like further information from school newsletters and websites than is currently provided. Australian and international research studies, however, have not focussed on the relationship between the provision of information through newsletters and websites and student outcomes.

- While Australian and international research reports the benefits of community liaison officers, this project has not found any rigorous empirical research into the efficacy of this role.
- International quantitative research has shown a significant negative correlation between the frequency of parent-teacher interaction and students' outcomes. In other words, students who have levels of achievement or are experiencing difficulties in the classroom are more likely to have frequent contact with their child's teacher, particularly in the case of secondary students.
- International research has found that the quality and effectiveness of home-school communication is more important than the frequency.
- Studies of early childhood and primary students have suggested that higher levels of parent-teacher interaction can be beneficial for the child's outcomes, with one study indicating that students' test results were improved by up to 40 per cent when their parents had high levels of communication with the school.
- Australian and international research proposes that increased communication between parents and teachers, particularly in the early years of schooling, provide parents with beneficial and additional information about their child.

Section 2.3 *Volunteering*

The section on Epstein's (1995) third category of participation is concerned with all forms of parents' volunteering, including active participation in the classroom, participation in school programs like fundraising and attending school activities. An examination of research into volunteering shows inconsistent findings in relation to the influence that this type of parental involvement may have on student outcomes. Some studies unequivocally state that parents' volunteering in the school has a significant relationship with improved student outcomes (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004; Feiler et al. 2006; Munoz 2000; Sanders and Epstein 2000). On the other hand, studies such as Harris and Goodall indicate that volunteering 'confers little or no real benefit on the individual child' (Harris and Goodall 2006).

One limitation in the available evidence about this category of parental engagement is that some studies do not differentiate between volunteering at the school and volunteering in other activities, like fundraising, which support the school but may not take place on the school site or with others from the school community. It is important to make a distinction between where the volunteering activities take place and if these activities are performed by individuals or in a group. Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001) state that parents' presence at the school may be viewed by teachers and school staff as a demonstration of the importance that the parent places on their children's education. It should be noted that a number of studies use teachers' perceptions as a measure of parental involvement (for example, Bacete and Ramirez 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler

and Brissie 1987; Rimm-Kaufmann et al. 2003). Falbo, Lein and Amador's (2001) findings suggest that teachers may perceive higher levels of engagement when they see parents participating in activities at the school. Teachers' perceptions of parent involvement may not be an accurate measure of all types of involvement activities.

It has been reported that parents' participation at the school site may have further benefits for both the school and parents. Saulwick Muller Social Research found that active participation at school may 'positively alter the school culture' and 'contribute to the building of social capital in the community' (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 14). Caldwell and Spinks describe how high levels of social capital, defined as 'the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks' (2008, page 32), can assist schools by enhancing attitudes towards the school and a strong sense of community. When active on the school campus, parents can assist the school in creating a welcoming community environment, which is related to improved relationships with all parents (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Australian parents who volunteer at the school report significant benefits in terms of improving their social networks and self-growth (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). The study by Saulwick Muller Social Research (2006) employed both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, including repeated school visits, interviews and surveys prior to and following student testing. Although Australian schools were selected and paid for their participation in the data collection of this study, the findings are based on multiple measures of school involvement. This recent study, therefore, seems to provide the strongest evidence base on parental involvement that is currently available in Australia.

A number of studies have found that one benefit of parental involvement at the school site may be linked to improved home-school communication. It is noted that when parents are active at the school, they have more opportunities to gain information from school staff and other sources about school activities. Falbo, Lein and Amador assert that by being given information about student opportunities, parents increase 'the likelihood that the freshman (student) becomes involved in special classes and school activities' (2001, page 527). Furthermore, when parents volunteer in their child's classroom they share important information with their child's teacher. Baker et al.'s (2001) study on numeracy shows that when a child is experiencing problems in their learning both teachers and parents tend to view this in terms of some sort of deficit:

the teacher in terms of her subject knowledge or her use of ineffective teaching practices; the child in her lack of skills, knowledge and understandings; and the home as lacking the schooled numeracy knowledge to support their children.

(Baker et. al. 2001, page 43)

Although they provide little evidence for this finding, this study indicates that by volunteering in the classroom, parents and teachers have the opportunity to see how the other interacts with the student and gain a greater understanding of the child's learning in both the home and school setting. Volunteering on the school site, therefore, may

enhance the relationships and increase the level of unstructured communication between teachers and parents.

In addition to the benefits to the school and the parents, research studies have found a relationship between parental volunteering at the school site and some forms of student outcomes. Darch, Miao and Shippen (2004), for example, have suggested that parent involvement in the classroom may reduce children's disruptive behaviour. Many studies and meta-analyses of research have supported the finding that parental involvement in the classroom increases student motivation and behaviour (Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Rosenzweig 2001). Sanders and Epstein's (2000) case study found that a 'parent patrol,' in which parents volunteered to monitor the school hallways, resulted in a marked improvement in student behaviour. Van Galen (1997) has cited a number of research studies which have also found that increased parent involvement at schools is linked with student behaviour outcomes, particularly when the values of the schools are explicit and shared by the parents.

One case study of parental volunteers in the classroom reported that the benefits of volunteering include increasing parent and student engagement with the school (Feiler et al. 2006). Parental volunteering in the classroom may have benefits to student engagement as they are able to 'enrich and extend the curriculum by sharing their career expertise, enthusiasm about vocations, and cultural knowledge' (Hunter 1989, cited in Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004, page 36). By sharing their knowledge and skills with members of the school community, parents can contribute to the intellectual capital of the school. Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros (1999) also cite a case study which indicates that increased parental involvement in the school has a relationship with student retention. Research into this area has also found a small but significant correlation between parent volunteering in all types of activities for the school and increased student retention (Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001). No further research has been conducted, however, on identifying the reasons behind the relationship between volunteering and student retention. Each of these studies report links between parental involvement in volunteering and various forms of improved student outcomes. These findings, however, are primarily based on case studies of individual schools or programs. The findings, therefore, should not be generalised.

Jones and White (2000) indicate that one of the most frequently given and compelling reasons for volunteering in a school is the potential for increasing student achievement. Research findings into the relationship between volunteering and student achievement, however, have been inconsistent. Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros (1999) stated that adolescent students whose parents attended school activities were more likely to achieve higher grades than those whose parents did not attend. This finding was based on data collected through a questionnaire and was not substantiated by the inclusion of any further evidence. Rosenthal and Sawyers (1996) unequivocally state that increased parental involvement in the classroom has a direct link with student achievement. Munoz (2000) examined the relationship between the presence of volunteers in the classroom and the academic achievements of students in their preparatory year. His data for the level of volunteerism were collected from school administrators and was correlated with

pre- and post-tests of students in reading and mathematics, although no statistical evidence has been made available. The results of this study found that where volunteers were active, students were more likely to raise their test scores in reading but there was no significant relationship with test results in mathematics. This finding is inconsistent with Henderson and Mapp's (2002) statement that the active involvement of volunteers in the classroom is likely to raise student achievement in both literacy and numeracy. These findings contrast with Harris and Goodall's (2006) statement that there is no evidence to suggest that parents' volunteering in a classroom will improve the achievement of their child.

The research that denotes a significant relationship between parental volunteering and student achievement tends to be in the area of early childhood or lower primary education (Fletcher and Silberberg 2006; Jones and White 2000; Munoz 2000). Henderson and Mapp report that in examining this relationship it was found that 'younger students (grades 2–4) made greater gains than older students (grades 5–8)' (2002, page 28). This finding is relevant to other studies which show that parents are more likely to volunteer in the lower levels of schooling (Mji and Mbinda 2005). Parents report the belief that a student in secondary school needs to be given greater responsibility and independence (Jeynes 2007). Furthermore, studies of students' perceptions of parental involvement in secondary schooling indicate that students do not want their parents to be active in volunteering at the school (Deslandes and Cloutier 2002; Mji and Mbinda 2005).

In their review of research, Henderson and Mapp (2002) also found that levels of parental volunteering were not significantly related to other variables, such as the socioeconomic background of families. The parent's gender, on the other hand, appears to have a relationship with the level of volunteering in the school. Although the gender of the parent is not stated in many studies, research indicates that the level of involvement of mothers, or other female parental figures, is higher than that of fathers, or male caregivers (Fletcher and Silberberg 2006; McBride and Schoppe-Sullivan 2005). In their Australian study, Fletcher and Silberberg (2006) found that about one fifth of volunteers were male and that their involvement was regularly in the areas of school sports, security or outdoor activities. Although far fewer males than females participate in classroom activities, McBride and Schoppe-Sullivan (2005) found that there is a 'significant relationship between father involvement in their children's education and student achievement beyond that accounted for by mother involvement' (2005, page 213). This research included a large sample of over 1 300 families and carried out statistical analyses of data which was taken from an earlier study on child development and family income.

By being involved in school activities, parents are contributing to a form of home-school partnership that has been widely promoted in school and educational policy, both in Australia and internationally. Cuttance and Stokes cite a number of studies to support the opinion that 'parents as partners, with a shared sense of purpose with teachers, provide the basis for improving student learning' (2000, page 4). Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros (1999) indicate that more than 80 per cent of parents of secondary schools reported that they want to be involved in their child's schooling. Three-quarters of these parents, however, reported that one reason that they did not participate more actively was

that ‘the school had never contacted them about such activities’ (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999, page 4). Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001) noted the finding from a number of research studies that parents are more likely to volunteer when invited to by the school. The Australian-based research by Goos et al. (2007) also raised the issue that ‘parents are usually invited by schools only when it is needed, and staff of some schools want parents to be involved only in specific ways and at times determined by staff (Goos et al. 2007, page 9).

While there are a number of studies that have identified a relationship between volunteering and improved student outcomes, the limitations that are inherent in each of the studies need to be highlighted. This section has shown that many research findings are based on case studies, which may indicate a pattern but should not be generalised to account for activities in other schools. The identification of a correlation between volunteering and improved student outcomes is important as it indicates that some relationship exists. As previously noted, one limitation of examining statistical correlations is that they do not provide any information of cause and effect. The statistical relationships that have been identified, therefore, indicate a need for further examination of the area and do not provide compelling evidence themselves. The inconsistencies and limitations of many of these studies highlight the need for further research into the relationship between male and female volunteering and all forms of student outcomes.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: VOLUNTEERING

- Research has shown that volunteering activities that take place on the school site and in contact with other members of the school community have a positive relationship with improved student outcomes, including increases in student motivation, engagement and retention and decreases in disruptive behaviour.
- By sharing their knowledge and skills, parents who volunteer can increase the school’s intellectual capital. Parent volunteering in school-based activities can also increase the social capital of the school, which has been identified as having a relationship with improved student outcomes.
- Parent involvement with activities at the school has been linked to increases in effective home-school communication. Parents who volunteer at the school site are reported have greater access to information about the school, education services and their child’s performance in the classroom that may assist their child.
- The research findings are inconsistent about the relationship between parents’ volunteering and student achievement in literacy. A number of research studies have shown, however, that students whose parents attend school events or volunteer at the school are more likely than other students to achieve higher results in mathematics testing.
- Parents are most likely to volunteer at the lower levels of schooling, for example, when their children are in primary school.

Section 2.4 Learning at Home

In the Epstein (1995) model, used by the majority of researchers, ‘learning at home’ encompasses such diverse activities as monitoring and supervising homework, listening and reading to children, displaying an interest in the children’s school activities and extending children’s interest in a subject area. In this category, homework is the major area of parental involvement in children’s education in the home. As such, homework has become the subject of increasing interest for international researchers investigating the benefits of parental engagement at home (Walker et al. 2004). While Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1995) stress that in order for research to produce meaningful results there needs to be a consistent definition of homework, researchers have found it difficult to agree on a meaning (Warton 2001). One definition that is widely regarded as acceptable describes homework as ‘tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours’ (Cosden et al. 2001). While this definition focuses on homework as an activity or task and sustains the view of school and home as separate and distinct locations, home work for Warton is a ‘process’ (Warton 2001, unpaginated). In Warton’s definition, the interaction of the people involved is privileged above the activity itself while the significance of the location is de-emphasised. Warton states that ‘homework is a multi-faceted process that involves a complex interplay of factors in two contexts- home and school- and a range of participants from school-system level employees to individual students’ (Warton 2001, unpaginated). The line between home and school as distinct locations in which different educational activities are performed is further blurred in the interactive program designed by Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) ‘Teachers Involve Parents in School Work’ (TIPS). In replacing ‘homework’ with ‘school work’ the researchers are asserting the inter-connectedness of school and home in the student’s learning processes.

In the more general area of homework, Australian and international research has found that parental engagements decreases once a child starts secondary school , significantly in the upper secondary years (Jeynes 2005; Jeynes 2007; Rowe 1991). Australian and international research also shows that parents with low educational levels may not feel that they have the knowledge to assist in more complex homework once their children begin secondary school (Crozier 1997; Feiler et al. 2006; Rowe 1991). That parents become disengaged from their children’s homework at the secondary school level is, however, not a consistent finding of the research. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that while parents of secondary school students were less likely to be involved at school their involvement at home ‘remains steady’ (Henderson and Mapp 2002, page 30).

International research has pointed to the disinclination on the part of the school in creating pathways between high school and home as one reason for decreasing parental involvement in secondary schooling (Van Voorhis 2001). Parents’ socioeconomic and educational levels have also been cited as factors which operate as conduits and barriers to parental involvement in the home (Edwards and Alldred 1999; Englund et al. 2004; Lareau 1997; Simon 2001). Time and parental skill are other factors determining

involvement (Englund et al. 2004). Research has also demonstrated that parental attitudes and beliefs, expectations and self-efficacy influence both parental involvement and its effect (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 1995; Walker et al. 2004). Although within the Epstein model, parental beliefs and expectations fall under the category of 'parenting' rather than 'learning at home,' it might be argued that these attitudinal aspects might better be understood as an overarching influence that have effect across each of the parent involvement categories rather than being placed in a single category.

While homework is a central site for research into parental engagement in the home, international findings have been inconsistent in identifying its benefits. As Fan and Chen have stated, most of the research has been empirical and that 'among the empirical studies that have investigated the issue quantitatively, there appears to be considerable inconsistencies' (Fan and Chen 1999, page 1). Both Cooper et al. (1998) and Van Voorhis (2001) found a positive relationship between parent participation in homework and student achievement. A number of researchers have found either a negative or negligible influence of parental engagement on student outcomes (Delandes and Bertrand 2005; Epstein, Simon and Salinas 1997; Fan and Chen 1999; Jeynes 2005). While the negative relation is interesting, some researchers have argued that that these findings reveal the need for more specific research classifications and controls (Fan and Chen 1999; Jeynes 2005).

The limitations of research studies that have not controlled for the variables of prior student achievement is apparent in the meta-analyses of available research performed by Fan and Chen (1999) and Jeynes (2005). Both studies found that there was a negative relationship between parental involvement in homework and student achievement. Fan and Chen found that parental involvement in homework had 'the weakest relationship' with student academic achievement (Fan and Chen 1999, page 13). As Jeynes' (2005) meta-analysis demonstrates, however, when no sophisticated controls were used in the research the negative correlation was significantly higher than when controls for prior achievement were imposed. The findings enabled Jeynes to conclude that 'the students whose homework was most likely checked by their parents were those who most need it, that is challenged students' (Jeynes 2005, page 262).

Further questions about the directional relationship between parental involvement and student achievement have been raised in an American study by Englund and her associates (2004). The researchers studied 187 low income children and their mothers from birth to grade 3. The study found that the mother's educational level had a direct effect on children's IQ and indirect effects on achievement in both grade 1 and 3. Furthermore, the study suggests an inter-directional relationship between involvement and achievement. The higher the level of student achievement in grade 1 the more involved the mother was in grade 3 (Englund et al. 2004).

Research into home-school engagement and its influence on student outcomes has tended to focus on the parent. Edwards and David (1997) have suggested that this focus overlooks the role played by the child in facilitating or blocking parental engagement. Elsewhere, students' invitations to parents have been a focus of research interest. One

American study by Walker et al., which examined the effect of student invitations to parents at primary school level, found ‘modest support for some of the hypothesised links between child invitations and parental involvement in children’s education’ (Walker et al. 2004, page 10). Positive benefits of student invitation have been identified by international researchers Deslandes and Bertrand (2005). The 2005 Canadian study of high school students found that ‘the links between perceived adolescent invitations and involvement in the home are robust across family characteristics’ (Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005, page 8).

Parental involvement in children’s early literacy is another large research domain. Although the focus of research has been on formal programs structured by teachers rather than informal parental involvement in their children’s reading activities and literacy, Australian and international researchers have nonetheless found positive benefits to children’s literacy when parents participate in literacy learning (Cairney 1994; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Jones and Rowley 1990; Rowe 1991; Spreadbury 1995). Research which has focused on teacher invitations to parents to be more involved in homework has yielded interesting results. In their 1991 questionnaire-based study Epstein and Dauber found teachers’ invitations for parental involvement in an American inner city elementary and middle school to have a positive correlation to improved academic outcomes. Continued research into the effects of teacher-designed interactive homework by Epstein and her fellow researchers, ‘Teachers Involve Parents in School work’ (TIPS), have built on these earlier findings (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001; Simon 2001; Van Voorhis 2004). Research findings have been mixed, however, when it comes to the influence of parents’ involvement in homework and academic achievement. Research reports that the real outcomes of parental involvement are seen in students’ attitudes towards homework rather than in improved academic achievement (Epstein, Salinas and Simon 1997). In his 2001 study, Van Voorhis found that in both his interactive homework group and his control group the highest indicator of academic success was prior achievement. In summarising the research findings to date on the effect of interactive science programs, international researchers Fler and Rillero noted that the programs had enthusiastic participants, but ‘none... report that participation in the program enhanced science achievement of the student’ (Fler and Rillero 1999, page 110).

In Australia, there has been very little research into the effects of interactive homework. Despite the widely held belief in the benefits of programs, Cairney (1994) has argued that parental involvement which is formally structured by teachers is less effective than reading and literacy activities taken on voluntarily by the parent. In Cairney’s assessment, ‘involvement programs are often shallow, ineffectual, confusing and frustrating to both parents and teachers’ (Cairney 1994, page 265). It should be noted, however, that far less research has been performed into the effect of programmes designed to assist parents improve their children’s literacy in Australia than in the United States and the United Kingdom. Australian researchers and policy-makers, therefore, do not have a substantial and context-specific evidence base for further research or policy decisions.

One study conducted by two researchers from the University of New England, Soliman and Watson, on the implementation of interactive homework in a NSW secondary school

in 1994, drew some interesting conclusions. The study found that one reason teachers were attracted to an interactive program was because 'it does not entail increased time spent by teachers in meetings with parents face to face' (Soliman and Watson 1994, unpaginated). This view of some teachers' reluctance to meet with parents supports other research findings into barriers to parental involvement touched on by Crozier (1997) and more fully explored by Dom and Verhoeven (2006). Further questions about the reliability of the evidence presented in many of the research studies mentioned here need to be asked when it is recognised that these studies rely on self-reporting as a means of accessing knowledge of involvement.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: LEARNING AT HOME

- Australian and international research has shown that parental engagement decreases once a child starts secondary school and fall significantly in the upper secondary years.
- Australian and international researchers have found positive benefits to children's literacy when parents participate in literacy learning.
- While research has not conclusively shown that parental involvement in homework improves student achievement, there is strong evidence to suggest that parental involvement in homework improves student behaviour and motivation in the class room.
- Research suggests that parents are more likely to be involved in homework if their children are either high or low achieving students. The research raises questions, however, for practice on how to engage the parents of students whose academic performance is average.
- More Australian research is needed on local interactive homework and literacy programs designed to engage parents and their effects on student outcomes.

Section 2.5 *Decision-Making*

The fifth category of parental engagement describes involvement in school decision-making processes. In this report, we also use the term 'governance' to describe these decision-making processes in the school. Parents can be active in the governance of their children's school through being a member of the School Council or through the Parents and Citizens Association. Although their functions may vary according to the education system in which they are situated, school councils tend to have input into some aspects of policy-making of the school, outside day-to-day management. Members of school councils are normally elected representatives of the school community, unlike members of other parents' associations who may be volunteers. School councils are often informed of, or involved in, school issues such as the selection of principals, the allocation of

school funds and decisions that may have an impact on the whole school, such as setting school values. The degree to which the members of school councils are consulted on these issues can vary between schools and education systems.

State schools in Queensland may choose to maintain a school council, although it is not mandatory to do so. There are school councils in approximately 250 Queensland state schools (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, *Schools Directory*). The *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* mandates that these school councils must include at least one elected parent member (*Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*, page 71). This is part of the Queensland Government's movement to build greater levels of partnership between parents and all levels of education, as outlined in the 'Education and Training Reforms for the Future' White Paper (Queensland Government 2002). Parents can volunteer to participate in the Parents and Citizens Association, which function at each of the approximately 1300 government schools in Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, *Schools Directory*). Some schools ensure that parents involved in these Parents and Citizens Associations are actively involved in some decision-making processes. State schools in Queensland have a high degree of flexibility in their level of consultation with the Parents and Citizens Association. Some Queensland schools involved in the case studies for this project have chosen not to maintain a school council but often consult members of the Parents and Citizens Association on changes to the school's policies and practices.

In 1983 in Victoria, it became mandatory for schools to have at least a quorum of elected parents on the school board, the equivalent to a school council. A quorum is at least two thirds of the total members which may include between six and fifteen members in parent, department employee and community categories (Department of Education and Training, Victoria 2005). The majority of members on the school board must be from the 'parent' or 'community' categories. The parents on school boards in Victoria are elected as representatives of the school's parent community and assist in the governance of the school for the benefit of the school, the students and the parent community (Department of Education and Training, Victoria 2005). This mandate, however, has not been without controversy. In the 1990s, there was a perception that teachers, who were also parents, were being used to fill the parent requirements on the school board and lobbying for issues on behalf of the teachers' unions (Department of Education and Training, Victoria 2005). As a result a new requirement was put in place stating that teachers must be a minority in school boards. A 2005 review of governance arrangements in Victorian state schools has recommended the continuation of the current arrangement under which parent and community members must constitute a majority of members on the school board (Department of Education and Training, Victoria 2005).

In 2004 a participation law that expanded the powers of school councils and formalised the school parents' associations was passed in Flanders, Belgium (Dom and Verhoeven 2006). In their research, Dom and Verhoeven conducted interviews with parents, teachers, principals and members of school boards and found that 'not all of the reactions to this new participation law were positive' (Dom and Verhoeven 2006, page 568). Much of the research has found that parents who participate in school governance are

predominantly from middle-class backgrounds (Crozier 1997; Englund et al. 2004; Lareau 1996). These studies have shown that well-educated, middle class parents were more likely to feel at ease in communicating with and being involved in their children's schools than parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or with lower levels of education (Kelly 2001). Harris and Goodall have suggested that parental participation in school decision-making 'can reinforce the existing power division . . . and reproduce existing educational inequalities around class, gender and ethnicity' (Harris and Goodall 2006, unpaginated). Dom and Verhoeven (2006), however, found that recent legislative changes in Belgium which give parents a greater say in school governance have empowered parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds to become actively involved in the decision-making processes at their children's school. This finding is consistent with Australian research which has found that involvement in school governance gives parents 'a feeling of ownership of the school, an awareness of parents' voices being heard, and connections with other families' (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22).

Dom and Verhoeven ethnographic study of four schools in Flanders found that parental participation in school governance is different in each school setting and needs to be ethnographically studied at a micro-level. They believe that 'it is only at this level that elements of partnership and conflict [between the school and parents] can be detected' (Dom and Verhoeven 2006, page 568). As a result of their micro-level study, their findings should not be generalised for all schools in Flanders or other school systems. Their findings highlight the fact that each school displays differences in their views, policies and practices of parental involvement even within the same school system. These differences in schools need to be recognised in all studies of parental involvement in school settings.

We have previously noted the issues associated with using self-reported data for research into the area of parental involvement. Research has shown that self-reports should be used with caution as they provide subjective views on the topic under examination (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Dom and Verhoeven (2006) used self-reporting methods in their collection of data through interviews from multiple sources, including parents, school staff and school leaders. Their study, therefore, offers a range of perspectives on the level of parental involvement in each of the four schools involved in their case studies. The comparisons of data from multiple perspectives highlight the subjectivity of individual reports and assists researchers in obtaining well-rounded data for examination.

There is little research that focuses on the relationship between parental involvement in school decision-making practices and student outcomes. Participation in school governance tends to be only one action in studies that include multiple indicators of parental engagement. Studies including this indicator, however, are consistent in the finding that there does not seem to be any direct relationship between parental involvement in school decision-making processes and improved student outcomes (for example: Dom and Verhoeven 2006; Gauci 2005; Hood and LoVette 2002; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006; Van Galan 1997). Despite this lack of direct correlation with student outcomes, studies have shown that parental participation in school

governance has a number of benefits for both parents and students. In their Australian research, Cuttance and Stokes reported that:

research on the participation of parents in governance and decision-making provides no evidence of a direct relationship between the degree of parent involvement and student learning outcomes. It does, however, provide evidence of a number of indirect benefits, such as increasing the resources for the school as well as a number of individual benefits for the parents who participate through the enhancement of planning and management skills. (Cuttance and Stokes 2000, page 4)

Parental participation in school decision-making has been linked with positive outcomes for the schools, including building trust and social networks within the school community, which is a vital element in building parents' positive attitudes towards the school (Van Galen 1997). Hood and LoVette (2002) have identified a positive relationship between parents' perceptions of the school and the academic achievements of school students. A positive correlation has been found between participation in school governance and all other types of parental involvement (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999). Through the participation of parents, school leaders are able to receive genuine feedback on the progress of the school and build a strong community sentiment within the school (Gauci 2005). Furthermore, by speaking to parents, school leaders can gain new perspectives and new ideas about how the school is viewed by parents and the wider community. A research study has also shown that parental involvement in Parents and Citizens Associations enables parents to advocate for improved school resources (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999). Through these associations, parents are able to further assist schools by raising funds for new facilities and resources.

Although there is no direct positive correlation between student outcomes and parental participation in school decision-making processes, the research described here has shown that this participation has a number of beneficial outcomes for the school as a whole. The findings of these studies indicate that participation in school governance processes can empower parents, improve parents' attitudes towards the school and provide them with a feeling of community. Parents who participate in decision-making can, in turn, lobby the school for better resources, assist in funding resources and school improvements and provide the school with new perspectives on its administration. Parental participation in school decision-making processes can assist schools with building strong social capital. Each of these elements of community and school improvements may then assist with improving student outcomes.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: DECISION-MAKING

- School decision-making processes may vary between education systems both internationally and within Australia. Furthermore, there may be significant differences in the school governance processes between schools in the Queensland state school system. Parents' participation in school decision-making

should, therefore, be examined and understood in the context of the individual school.

- There is limited research on the relationship between parental participation in school decision-making processes and improved student outcomes. The research in this area, however, has not conclusively shown any direct correlation between parents' involvement in school governance and student outcomes.
- Parents' participation in school decision-making processes can have benefits for the school by potentially increasing school resources, creating a collaborative and open school environment and gaining vital feedback from members of the school community.

Section 2.6 Collaborating with the Community

Australian and international research interest in the area of collaboration between school and community and its effects on student educational outcomes has focused on parenting programs and overall the findings are positive (Bowes 2002; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Henderson 1987; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005). Parenting programs cover a diverse range of involvement strategies. Henderson and Mapp (2002) have noted differences between the effectiveness of some programs and have cautioned against regarding them as homogenous. In their view, 'programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming, and address specific parent and community needs' (Henderson and Mapp 2002, page 43). In Australia, there has been limited research into the effects of parenting programs on student achievement. Despite the proliferation of parenting education programs run through local councils and organisations such as Parenting Australia and Relationships Australia, research interest has largely focused on the psychological and behavioural effects of parental intervention programs for children at risk (Elias et al. 2006; Sanders et al. 2003; Wellington et al. 2006). It seems that very little has changed in Australia since Cairney and Ruge called for further research in 1999: 'It is of considerable concern that there were so many home-school initiatives across the various school systems within Australia and yet there has been virtually no evaluation of these initiatives' (Cairney and Ruge 1999, unpaginated).

Nonetheless, in the research area of Australian parenting programs and the effects on student literacy, Cairney and associates have made a valuable contribution through their multiple studies on the area. Findings from a 1993 study showed that literacy levels among the children of low socioeconomic participating parents improved, as did the parents' confidence and understanding of the school following a parenting program (Cairney and Munsie 1995). Research findings by Cairney and associate researchers have more recently been built on by Elias et al. (2006) in their six month study, which examined the effect of reading to pre-school children program on their literacy preparedness in their first year of school. Parents were all from low socioeconomic backgrounds and 54 per cent of the parents did not speak English as a first language. The study found that parent-child reading time more than doubled and that teachers reported

higher levels of literacy preparedness in the children of the parents who had taken part in the program.

Of some interest to the question of parenting programs and their effect on student educational outcomes is a Queensland study into the effects of 'The Pathways Prevention Project' (Hommel et al. 2006). The project is a joint initiative between Griffith University, the Queensland Government and Mission Australia and delivers programs to parents with children aged between four and six. The programs are designed to overcome the challenges created by low socioeconomic status and have been developed from research evidence (Hommel et al. 2006). The analysis of data collected by Hommel et al. on two Pathways initiatives, 'The Family Independence Program' and 'The Preschool Intervention Program', found a positive relationship between the programs and student outcomes. 'The Family Independence Program' targeted student educational outcomes through the provision of 'Supporting Kids in Language and Literacy Skills' (SKILLS) and 'Helping Your Child Succeed in School'. The study found that the children whose parents participated in 'The Family Independence Program' had improved attitudes to schooling. They also found that all students improved their language skills regardless of whether their parents were native English speakers. Interesting gender differences, however, were located in the study of 'the Preschool Intervention Program.' The study found that while the program had little effect on girls, boys displayed better school preparedness and improved behaviour.

Despite these interesting findings in Australia, the majority of research into the effects of parenting programs on student educational outcomes comes from the United States. Moreover, the influence of the research showing that parental involvement in these programs improves student outcomes appears to have been far more influential in shaping educational policy in the United States than it has been in Australia. In 2001 parental involvement became government policy with the enactment of the '*No Child Left Behind*' legislation. The '*No Child Left Behind*' Act requires schools to involve parents in school programs and in the education of their children' (*No Child Left Behind* 2001, unpaginated). Research which found a correlation between low socioeconomic status and poor student achievement has been applied to develop intervention programs to assist parents of children, who are deemed to be at risk of low achievement (Mattingly et al. 2002). While there is agreement among most researchers in the United States as to the benefits of parenting programs, there is some argument over whether research has actually been able to provide the evidence for its effectiveness (Baker and Soden 1998; Gorman and Balter 1997; Halpern 2004; Mattingly et al. 2002).

In their review of the studies examining the relationship between parenting programs and student achievement, Mattingly et al. state that 'evaluation of parental involvement programs does not always provide evidence of their effectiveness' (Mattingly et al. 2002, page 55). In most of the 41 studies they reviewed the researchers found serious flaws with the methodology, design and analysis. They noted that Henderson's (1987) key finding that there is a positive relationship between parenting programs and improved student achievement was not reliable because half of the research she examined had not been published in refereed journals. Serious design flaws, such as asking respondents

after the completion of the program to recall and report their attitudes before they undertook the program, were detected in other studies. Mattingly and associates (2002) further noted that many of the studies did not use a control group. Despite the contention that parenting programs can counteract the effects of low socioeconomic status, very few studies they surveyed paid attention to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of participants. Four of the 41 studies reviewed by Mattingly et al. (2002) were judged to have applied rigorous research methods to the collection of data and its analysis. Of these four studies, half found no significant relationship between parenting programs and student achievement. In conclusion, the researchers found ‘little empirical support for the widespread claim that parent involvement programs are an effective means of improving student achievement’ (Mattingly et al. 2002, page 549). More recently, Jeynes (2005) has accused Mattingly and associates of the same research flaw they located in Henderson’s (1987) study. In his meta-analysis, Jeynes (2005) found a positive relationship between parenting programs and student achievement and, in reference to Mattingly et al.’s earlier review, noted that many of the studies they referred to which supported negative findings were drawn from unpublished studies, and, therefore, had not been peer refereed.

In the United States, the debate about the reliability of the research on parenting programs is on-going. Further criticism of the validity of the evidence has been made by Halpern (2004). Overall he described the findings as ‘equivocal’ (Halpern 2004, page 2). For Halpern, the serious flaws in the research make it impossible to draw an evidence based conclusion. The study notes that ‘At least some approaches to parenting support programs and education do have significant effects on parenting but the design, analytical strategies and/or measures used in this field are obscuring those effects’ (Halpern 2004, page 8). A further issue for Halpern is the broad ‘off-the-shelf’ definitions of programs used by researchers. In his opinion ‘parent support and education programs have inherently modest effects because parenting is inherently difficult to both define and to alter’ (Halpern 2004, page 9).

Given the inconsistencies of the research findings as well as the considerable doubts cast on the research methodologies by a number of leading researchers in the field, the evidence as to the benefits of parenting programs on student educational outcomes is found here to be inconclusive. We also note that the majority of research in this area is American and that very little work has been done in Australia evaluating the effectiveness of parenting programs designed to assist parents become more actively involved in their children’s learning.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

- There is considerable debate among international researchers as to whether parenting programs improve student achievement.
- International and Australian research which has found a positive relationship between parenting programs and improved student outcomes suggests that

parenting programs which are sensitive to the cultural needs and values of the parents may be more effective.

- More research is needed on why effective programs raise student achievement.

Section 3 Costs and Benefits of Parental Engagement to Schools and School Communities

The research on parental engagement has a strong focus on the relationship between parent involvement in education and student outcomes. Section 2 of this report offered an overview of research, which demonstrates the influence that each type of parental engagement may have on student outcomes. Very few studies, however, examine the possible costs and benefits of parental participation for school leaders, staff, the school community and students, aside from improvements in student outcomes. This report defines ‘costs’ of parent participation as any commitment that the school community makes during the design and implementation of policies and programs to enhance and support parental engagement. Our broad definition of the term ‘cost’ is not restricted to the idea of monetary resources. While school communities may be required to commit financial resources, they may also commit school facilities, time and expertise to increase and maintain parental engagement in the school. We are using a similarly broad definition of the ‘benefits’ of parental engagement to describe any positive outcomes that activities in each category of Epstein’s (1995) framework may have on the school and school community. These positive outcomes may include increases in the social networks or the knowledge and skills of members of the community. Schools and school systems need to be aware of the potential costs and beneficial outcomes of increased parental engagement when planning or implementing new policies and programs for this purpose. This section also draws from references in the literature about the ways in which each category of parental involvement in Epstein’s (1995) framework may have costs and benefits for the school staff, administration and the school community as a whole.

Sections 1 and 2 of the review described the notion of schools’ having ‘social capital’, first raised by Coleman’s (1988) study which showed that schools with high levels of social capital tended to have high-achieving students. Social capital is described by Caldwell and Spinks (2008) as the strength of school networks and relationships which have the potential to support or be supported by the school. One way in which schools are able to strengthen these networks and relationships, or build social capital, is through enhancing the trust and involvement of their parent community. This research shows that enhanced parental engagement can benefit schools’ social capital. Conversely, low levels of parental involvement may be seen as a cost, or deficit, to the social capital of the school. The social capital of schools, however, is only one type of school resource that parental engagement can positively or negatively influence. As indicated above, parental engagement can have costs and benefits for the school community in a number of ways and draw from or add to a range of resources including social capital and financial capital. In order to identify and assess the range of possible costs and benefits of parental engagement, school communities and school leaders need to understand the range of resources, or forms of capital, which are available to the school and may be influenced.

Caldwell and Spinks (2008) offer a holistic model of the resources available to the school, each of which may be positively or negatively influenced by parental engagement

activities. The student lies at the heart of this model in order to depict the need for schools to effectively manage all types of resources to secure improved outcomes for all students in all settings. The focus of effective resource allocation for many schools is money. Caldwell and Spinks' (2008) research, however, has shown that schools have access to different types of resources which, like social capital and money, can be used to support successful outcomes for all students in all settings. He describes these resources as four types of capital: social capital, financial capital, intellectual capital and spiritual capital. In this model financial capital refers to the monetary resources available to schools. Intellectual capital describes the knowledge and skills of all those who work in or for the schools, including the parent community. Finally, spiritual capital refers to the morals, values and beliefs about life and learning of the school and the school community.

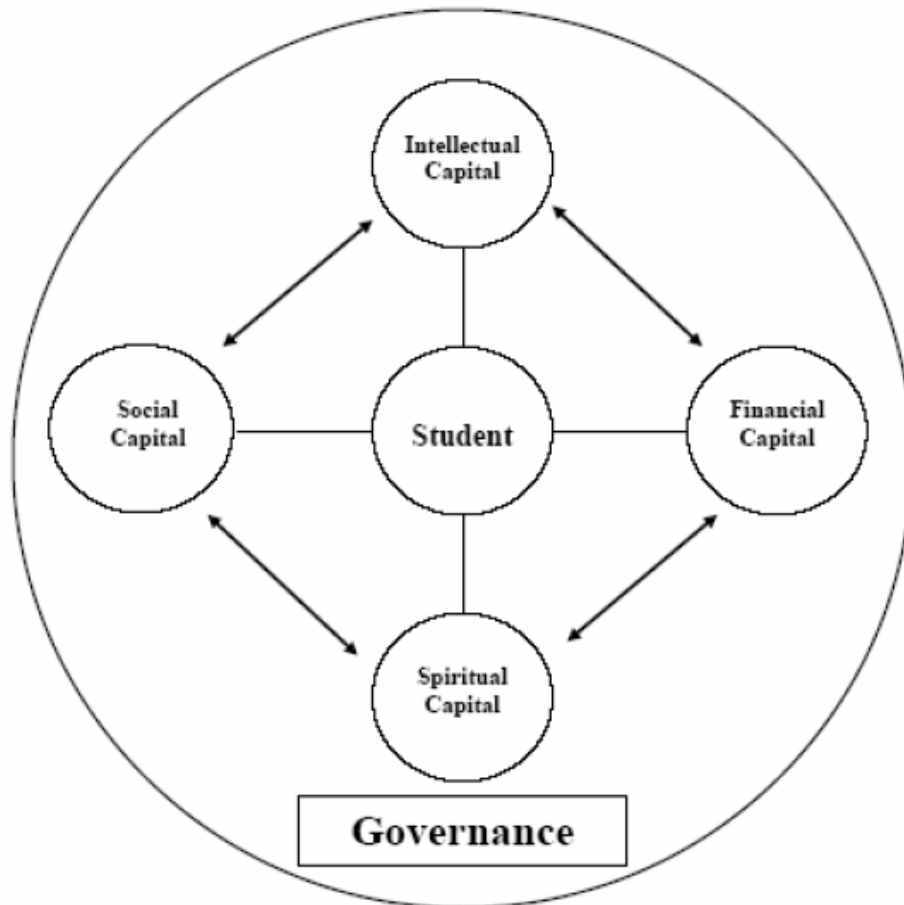
Caldwell and Spinks' (2008) research has shown that intellectual and social capital are as important to the creation of opportunities for all students in all settings as financial capital. Spiritual capital is an emerging concept in education. International and Australian research has shown that schools with high levels of financial capital do not necessarily have higher student outcomes than other schools with lower monetary resources. This finding is highlighted by the example of the education system in Finland, where primary schools receive the equivalent of US\$ 82 less per student than Australia and secondary schools receive around US\$ 254 less per student than Australian government secondary schools (OECD 2005, page 172). Students from Finland, however, have consistently achieved the highest ranking in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. One explanation for the level of achievement of Finnish students is that schools in Finland have high levels of social, spiritual and intellectual capital (Harris 2006). In terms of intellectual capital, for example, all Finnish teachers are required to hold a Masters' degree and are expected to be an expert in pedagogy and their subject area (Harris 2006). These forms of social and intellectual capital appear, therefore, to be more important than financial capital in this instance in supporting high levels of student achievement.

These forms of capital, however, do not work in isolation. Financial capital, for example, is required to attract high quality staff and ensure that they remain at the forefront of knowledge and skills. As another example, a school with high levels of social capital may draw from the knowledge and skills of its community to increase its intellectual capital. School communities can work together in fundraising to increase the financial capital of a school or can share their values and beliefs to strengthen the school's spiritual capital. School decision-making processes, therefore, need to ensure that each of the four types of capital work together in 'a coherent and consistent manner' (Caldwell 2007, page 53). Outstanding school governance is required to strategically and effectively manage each of these forms of capital to achieve a transformation that creates 'unprecedented opportunity for learners and learning' (Caldwell and Spinks 2008, page 32).

The research described in this report demonstrates that enhanced parental involvement may lead to increased student outcomes, and thus, may create an 'opportunity for learners and learning'. This examination will draw from the alignment for transformation model

to describe the positive and negative effects that all types of parental engagement may have on each form of the school's capital.

Figure 1 Alignment for Transformation Model



(Caldwell and Spinks 2008, page 33)

The Alignment for Transformation Model (Figure 1) has a similar focus to the IDEAS model, developed by Frank Crowther and his colleagues at the University of Southern Queensland and implemented in Queensland schools by the Department of Education, Training and the Arts. The IDEAS model is described by Caldwell and Spinks (2008) as seeking alignment between pedagogy, infrastructure, the strategic foundations of the school and a cohesive community, concepts which share similarities with the concepts of intellectual, financial, spiritual and social capital. Both the IDEAS model and the Alignment for Transformation Model (ATM) include a focus on social involvement, described in the IDEAS model as a cohesive community and the ATM as social capital.

As previously stated, the level of parental engagement can be viewed as a benefit or a cost to the social capital of a school. Parental engagement, however, can have a range of

costs and benefits for schools which are not limited to increases or decreases in the school's social resources. This section will examine the potential costs and benefits of each form of parental engagement, defined by Epstein's framework. These costs and benefits will be examined according to Caldwell's alignment model to show the costs and benefits that all types of parental engagement can have on each of the four forms of capital: social, financial, intellectual and spiritual capital.

Section 3.1 Parenting

The parental involvement activities described in the 'parenting' category of Epstein's (1995) model include parents' attitudes and beliefs about education and activities such as selecting a school for their child. This report has noted that the differences between the attitudes and activities should be highlighted, as parent attitudes towards education may have an influence on their participation in all other forms of parent involvement. The attitudes and activities included in the 'parenting' category of involvement overwhelmingly take place in the home. These types of involvement, therefore, do not place pressure on the school's financial, intellectual, spiritual or social capital. There are ways, however, that positive parent attitudes and involvement in 'parenting' activities can have a positive influence on these resource levels.

Studies have indicated that parents' attitudes towards schooling may have a relationship with other types of parent involvement (Walker et al. 2004). Increased levels of parental involvement may have a positive influence on the school's social capital. Furthermore, parents' attitudes and beliefs about life and learning, which are shared by the school community, can have result in benefits for the spiritual capital of the school. Van Galen (1997) indicates that parental involvement occurs most frequently, and is most effective, in schools that share the values and beliefs of the parent community. A number of international research studies have also shown that parents' attitudes and beliefs about education may have an effect on students' outcomes, in the areas of student motivation, behaviour and academic achievement (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005; Jeynes 2005; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Shumow and Miller 2001; Walker et al. 2004). Higher levels of student motivation and better behaviour at school can undoubtedly be viewed as a benefit for students and school staff alike.

Higher levels of student achievement within the school can have a positive influence on the reputation of the school. Although Queensland and other Australian states and territories do not provide 'league tables' of schools, a practice which is common in the UK and United States, the 2005 regulations for school funding require all schools to provide public information about student achievement at the school (Australian Government 2005). Prospective parents are able to access these annual school reports and use this information in their selection of the most appropriate school for their child. While this is a required reporting mechanism, in which all Queensland schools participate, a number of schools spend additional time and financial resources on promoting their school as a school of choice.

Students who participated in interviews for the case study phase of this project reported that parents' support at home influenced their level of motivation in schooling and was considered a benefit of parental engagement. All parents and students from the secondary schools included in our case studies indicated that parents offered their children support and assistance in selecting post-schooling pathways. Our findings make an interesting point of comparison to Crozier's (1997) research which found that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have a clear vision of the post-schooling destinations for their children. While each of the participants from upper-secondary schools involved in these case studies reported that they spent a significant amount of time researching post-schooling pathways, students and parents reported that they felt that parents' assistance in this area was beneficial.

KEY FINDINGS: PARENTING

Benefits

- Positive parent attitudes and beliefs about education may influence other types of parental engagement.
- School communities that share attitudes and beliefs about life and learning have higher levels of spiritual capital and may increase parental engagement.
- Students in case studies reported motivational benefits from parent support.
- Upper secondary students in the case studies reported benefits in parents' assistance with researching and selecting post-schooling pathways.

Costs

- Schools may spend time and money in preparing a school prospectus, in order to attract parents and students.
- Students and parents in the case studies reported that they spent time and effort in researching post-schooling pathways.

Section 3.2 Communication

Research findings suggest that effective home-school communication is essential to building strong social networks and enhancing other forms of parental engagement (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). The establishment of open lines of communication can benefit both parents and school staff by sharing information about students. The sharing of information is particularly helpful for students with special needs, or when students are experiencing difficulties in their schooling, as it promotes teachers' understanding of the needs of the individual child (Baker et al. 2001; Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004). This

may have additional benefits for the student by informing all parties of any special needs that they may have. Effective home-school communication through modes like the school newsletter, website and interaction between parents and staff, can also assist the school and students by informing parents of special programs, activities and events (Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001). Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001) further show that parents' awareness of additional programs, activities and events can have a positive influence on student outcomes. Participation in these activities and events can also increase the social capital of the school and, in the case of fundraising activities, can provide financial benefits for the school.

The communication of values and attitudes between home and school promotes an understanding of other beliefs about life and learning. This is particularly important in communities which have a high level of cultural and religious diversity. Cuttance and Stokes have shown that 'schools' predominant perspective of the role of parents is that they are expected to adhere to and reinforce school values' (Cuttance and Stokes 2000, page 5). This perspective may have a negative influence on the relationships between parents and the school if parents feel pressured to adhere to values that they do not share. Van Galen, on the other hand, has reported that there are 'higher levels of student achievement, fewer discipline problems, and stronger parental support in schools where relationships between the school and its environment are shaped by shared, explicitly articulated norms and values' (Van Galen 1997, pages 1-2). Open and effective communication of values and beliefs shared by the school and parent community, therefore, can have a number of benefits for the school community and for student outcomes.

The establishment of open and effective lines of home-school communication, however, can have a number of costs for the school. The regular printing of newsletters, establishment and maintenance of school websites, mailing letters to parents and the employment of parent liaison officers each have financial costs for the school to bear. Schools with a culturally diverse parent community may also require translation services in order to effectively communicate with families from different language backgrounds, as described by one school in the case study phase of this project. Students from a culturally and linguistically diverse school included in the case studies are often required to act as translators between the school and their family. Language differences between schools and parents, therefore, can create costs of time and money for the school and costs of time for students.

One of the greatest costs of home-school communication to schools, however, is the time required for all school community members to form relationships and exchange information. Research has shown that effective home-school communication can have a positive influence on student outcomes (Hughes and MacNaughton 2001). Frequent interactions between teachers and parents, on the other hand, can be indicative of a student having problems in their schooling, including behavioural problems, non-attendance or trouble with the required work (Catsambis 2001). All forms of home-school communication have a time cost associated for both parents and members of school staff. Research has shown that parents report that time is a barrier to their

involvement (Englund et al. 2004). The time that it takes teachers and school leaders to communicate with parents has not been the subject of in-depth examination and is described further in Section 5.2 of this report. Structured communication, such as parent-teacher interviews and the preparation of student reports, is viewed by many as part of the teaching role. Research shows, however, that many teachers participate in a range of unstructured communication activities to forge relationships and provide regular information to parents (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Hughes and MacNaughton 2001; Kelly 2001; Knopf and Swick 2007). As previously stated, regular and effective home-school exchanges of information about students can have benefits for schools, parents and students.

Communication between teachers and parents can be fraught with difficulties. Some teachers have been found to have a negative perception of parents' interest and ability to assist their children in their education (Cairney and Munsie 1995; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Gribble and Rennie 2003; Crozier 1997; Van Voorhis 2001). Two Australian studies have recommended that teachers acknowledge and overcome these prejudices in order to communicate more effectively with parents (Goos et al. 2007; Gribble and Rennie 2003). Conversely, studies have shown that parents often avoid interacting with teachers, who they perceive as superior, and who might attempt to impose their attitudes and beliefs on parents (Crozier 1997; Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004). Parents with lower levels of education or from low socioeconomic backgrounds, in particular, report difficulties in interacting with members of the school community as they may not understand educational jargon (Englund et al. 2004; Lareau 1996). This finding has been supported by reports from parents in our case studies who indicated that changes in teaching and learning or interaction with teachers can make communicating with the school quite daunting. In addition to their perceptions of teachers, a small number of parents may be hostile to teachers. The Australian Education Union has stated that some teachers and principals have been victims of 'cyber-bullying', verbal abuse and even threats of physical violence from parents (Gough, in *The Sunday Age* 6 May 2007). School staff, therefore, need to be appropriately trained to communicate with parents and to diffuse any potentially hostile situations.

Ferrara and Ferrara indicate that 'teacher candidates receive minimal training in parental involvement concepts and strategies' (Ferrara and Ferrara 2005, unpaginated). Research has suggested that teachers need to be trained to effectively communicate and work with parents in order to successfully promote the concept of home-school partnerships (Ferrara and Ferrara 2005; Hango in press). As this training is not currently offered in pre-service teacher education, schools may be required to upgrade their teachers' skills in this area through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses. In 2006-07 the Department of Education, Training and the Arts in Queensland committed around \$40 million and required that around 10 per cent of school budgets be allocated to CPD of school staff (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, *Professional Development*). There are, however, a considerable number of areas in which CPD courses are required to upgrade and maintain the skills of all school staff. Teachers are required to stay at the forefront of knowledge in areas of pedagogy and content and need further training to respond to new reporting and accountability measures. The training of

teachers and other school staff to form partnerships with parents, therefore, may bring additional costs to the school's CPD budget. On a positive note, increasing skills of all school staff to effectively communicate and work in partnership with parents would have a direct positive influence on the school's intellectual capital.

KEY FINDINGS: COMMUNICATION

Benefits

- Research suggests that effective home-school communication has benefits for students, parents and schools.
- More information about special programs and activities can have benefits for student outcomes.
- Sharing information about fundraising programs with parents can have financial benefits for schools.
- Communication of the values and attitudes about life and learning can have benefits for the school's spiritual capital and can increase parental engagement, which holds benefits for both parents and the school.
- Training teachers to effectively communicate with parents can increase the intellectual capital of the school

Costs

- Structured forms of communication, such as school newsletters, websites and one-on-one interaction between teachers and parents can have time and financial costs for the school.
- Ineffective communication can cause difficulties such as hostility between teachers and parents or reticence to participate in home-school communication.
- Home-school communication in schools with culturally and linguistically diverse communities can have time and financial costs for the school and for students.
- Training teachers to communicate more effectively with parents can create financial costs for schools but may increase schools' intellectual capital.

Section 3.3 Volunteering

Parent volunteering can have a number of financial costs and benefits for schools, which are largely dependent on volunteering activities in which parents are involved. Although some research has found that volunteering in school fundraising activities confers little or

no benefits on the outcomes of individual students (Harris and Goodall 2006; Henderson and Mapp 2002), parents' involvement in fundraising can improve the social and financial capital of the school. There has been surprisingly little research on parental involvement that focuses on the costs and benefits of parent volunteers for schools. In a survey of volunteers at 68 schools, Brent (2001) found that half of all volunteers in American elementary schools have tertiary education. The skills and levels of expertise that parents can bring to the school may have benefits for the school curriculum and school organisation (Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004). The benefits of parent volunteers to the school are clearly demonstrated in one of our Queensland school case studies where a number of parents have offered their professional expertise to market the school, maintain computer systems and provide expert instrument tuition to students. Parents who volunteer in the school, therefore, have the potential to increase financial and intellectual capital in addition to strengthening the social capital of the school.

When volunteering in schools, parents can gain additional knowledge about specific programs and activities that can add to their child's school experience and may increase student retention and motivation (Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Rosenzweig 2001; Sanders and Epstein 2000). Parents in some of our case studies report that a significant benefit of being actively involved in school activities is that they are able to monitor their child's progress and understand their child's schooling context. Australian research has also found that volunteers in schools can gain additional knowledge and skills and report improvements in their feelings of self-growth and their social networks (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). When volunteering at the school site, parents can forge stronger relationships with teachers and other parents. As noted previously, strong relationships have benefits for parents and students, as well as raising the social capital of the school.

In addition to benefits for school communities, research has found that there are a number of costs to schools associated with high levels of parental volunteers (Brent 2001; National School Public Relations Association 1973). The recruitment, organisation and administration and record-keeping for volunteers require the time of school staff (Brent 2001). Volunteering at the school also requires a time commitment from parents, which may not be possible when they work during school hours. Participants in our case studies reported that many parents who volunteer in the school either do not work outside the home or provide their time by juggling work commitments.

Schools have a legal obligation to ensure that anyone who works in or for the school, including both paid employees and volunteers, are covered by insurance and observe occupational health and safety regulations. As described in the case study phase of this project, schools may choose to provide volunteers with an orientation session to ensure that they are aware of the health and safety regulations within the school. These orientation sessions and insurance premiums may have financial costs for the school. An early American study of the use of volunteers in schools, however, concludes that the benefits of having parents and other volunteers in the school greatly outweigh any associated costs (National Schools Public Relations Association 1973).

KEY FINDINGS: VOLUNTEERING

Benefits

- Volunteering in fundraising activities for the school may add to the school's financial capital.
- The school and students can benefit from parents' intellectual capital when they volunteer in the school.
- Studies have indicated that parental volunteering at the school site may increase student retention and motivation.
- Parents report benefits from volunteering in the school, including increased self-growth, social networks and understanding of their child's schooling programs.
- The relationships that are forged by parental volunteering can benefit parents and increase the social capital of the school.
- American research claims that the benefits of volunteering far outweigh any associated costs.

Costs

- The recruitment and administration of volunteers has a time cost for schools.
- Parents must make a time commitment in order to volunteer their assistance to schools.
- There may be a financial cost to schools in terms of liability insurance and educating parents about occupational health and safety issues.

Section 3.4 *Learning at Home*

Like activities included in the 'parenting' category, parental involvement in 'learning at home' generally takes place away from the school site and therefore has minimal effects on the school's resources. Research findings have been inconsistent in the identification of a relationship between parental involvement in learning at home, specifically in homework exercises, and student outcomes (Cooper et al. 1998; Deslandes and Bertrand 2005; Epstein, Simon and Salinas 1987; Fan and Chen 1999; Jeynes 2005; Van Voorhis 2001). While many of these studies suggest that parental involvement in homework activities may have benefits for students, the specific benefits of this type of engagement are unclear. Australian and international research on parental engagement in literacy activities, including reading to children and listening to children read, have found a range of benefits for children's literacy learning (Cairney 1994; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Jones and Rowley 1990; Mayfield and Ollila 1992; Rowe 1991; Spreadbury 1995).

Although there is an ongoing debate about homework activities, the costs and benefits of homework to the school have not been convincingly defined. In an examination of literature about homework, Sharp, Keys and Benefield (2001) highlight the costs and benefits of homework for schools as a priority area for future research. Teachers of most levels of schooling are expected and expect to set homework tasks and assignments for their students. The time spent setting and marking students' homework may be considered a financial cost for schools. The financial costs may be increased when teachers use or require the use of innovative materials for students' learning at home to increase parent-child communication, such as the project outlined by Feiler et al. (2006), where students were provided with disposable cameras to take photographs of activities that they participated in at home. Feiler et al.'s (2006) case study reports that both students and parents were highly involved in this project and that around 50 per cent of parents, a significant increase on previous parental involvement, attended class to assist their child in putting together an album of the photographs, which the school paid to have developed. While Feiler et al. (2006) reported increases in student and parent engagement, there was no discussion of whether these benefits outweighed the costs to the school.

As with all types of parental engagement, parents' participation in their child's learning at home requires a time commitment. Participants in our case studies also reported that many parents felt daunted or unclear about the requirements for homework, particularly at the secondary school level, due to changes in teaching and learning since their time at school. Participating students also indicated that while their parents offered assistance in their areas of interest and expertise, some participation in homework activities may lead to tension between family members.

KEY FINDINGS: LEARNING AT HOME

Benefits

- Although the specific benefits are unclear, parents participation in learning at home can have beneficial effects on student outcomes.
- Parent participation in literacy activities has been shown to have benefits for students' literacy skills.

Costs

- Setting and marking homework activities and at-home assignments requires a time commitment from teaching staff.
- The use or requirement of materials for learning at home may have a financial cost for schools and parents.
- Parents must commit time when they assist their child with learning at home and overcome any potential confusion or misunderstandings about the required work.

- Parent participation in learning activities at home can be a source of tension between parents and children.

Section 3.5 *Decision-Making*

Australian research into parent participation in school decision-making activities has a range of benefits for parents, which may include increasing their personal social capital by forming connections with other families, or intellectual capital through enhancing their planning and managerial skills (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). These studies have also indicated parent participation in school governance activities are an important factor in increasing parents' feelings of being valued by the school and having input into their child's educational institution (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). Research, however, has not identified any relationship between parental involvement in school governance and improved student outcomes.

In addition, some international research studies have examined the benefits for schools of parental engagement in school decision-making processes. Van Galen (1997) has shown that parent involvement in school governance, in forums such as the Parents and Citizens Association or school council, is linked with stronger and more trusting relationships between parents and the school. These relationships can build the social capital and feeling of community within the school setting. School leaders can draw on the expertise of their parent community and gather beneficial feedback on school decisions (Gauci 2005). It appears that parents can both support and be supported by the school by sharing information, knowledge and skills in school decision-making processes.

Research also indicates that parents are more likely to feel a sense of ownership of school decisions in which they have collaborated (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). This ownership may increase the likelihood that parents will support school policies and processes and advocate for improvements in the school (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999). In addition to the increases in social capital that can result from an increased sense of ownership in school decisions, parent advocacy has the potential to help improve the facilities and financial capital of the school.

While parents' participation in school decision-making processes can have a number of benefits for the school, there are also a number of associated costs. Parent participation in school governance may result in financial costs, stemming from the school's administration, preparation of materials and organisation of the decision-making processes to include parents. Collaborative decisions may take more time than strictly school-based governance practices and may take place outside of school hours. The meetings require a time commitment from parents, teachers and school leaders who participate in school decision-making processes. Research has shown that parents from middle-class backgrounds tend to participate more in school governance than parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Crozier 1997; Englund et al. 2004; Lareau 1996). Schools, therefore, may not receive feedback on decisions from all members of

their parent community. While Dom and Verhoeven (2006) show that regulations of parental involvement may empower parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in school decision-making processes, they also indicate that these regulations may be the cause of resentment by parents and schools who do not want this type of participation. This type of resentment may have a negative effect on the social capital of the school.

KEY FINDINGS: DECISION-MAKING

Benefits

- Participation in school governance processes can increase parents' social networks and provide them with planning and managerial skills.
- Schools can benefit from the skills of parents and the genuine feedback that they provide when participating in decision-making activities.
- Parent participation in school governance offers parents the opportunity to have a feeling of ownership of school decisions. This provides benefits to the parents and the schools, as it has the potential to increase both the school's social and financial capital.

Costs

- The administration of school decision-making processes, which involve parents and other members of the school community, may require financial and time resources from the school in setting convenient meeting times, preparing materials for all members and offering refreshments.
- A time commitment is required from all participants in school governance, including parents, students, teachers and school leaders. Collaborative and consultative decision-making processes may require a greater time commitment than processes whereby decisions are made by the school leadership team alone.
- Studies of the legislation of parental involvement in school decision-making processes in Belgium have shown that these types of legislated involvement may cause resentment among parents, which can have a negative impact on the social capital of schools.

Section 3.6 Collaborating with the Community

Collaborations with the community have been shown to have a range of benefits for the social, financial, spiritual and intellectual capital of schools (Caldwell 2006; Caldwell and Spinks 2008). In terms of parent involvement, collaborating with the community includes a range of parenting programs. A large number of Australian parenting programs

are run by outside agencies, universities and charitable organisations (Elias et al. 2006; Wellington et al. 2006). Many of these programs, therefore, do not have any costs for the school. School-based parenting programs, on the other hand, may use school facilities and have costs associated with staff time for the administration of the program. Australian and international parenting programs, offer support for parents which may include assisting with literacy skills or assisting in preparing their child to enter formal schooling. These parenting programs may provide benefits for parents by supporting them in learning new skills. The Queensland ‘Pathways Prevention’ programs, run by Griffith University and Mission Australia, have been designed to provide assistance to parents of children between four and six years of age. Research into two of these programs has shown that the program had benefits to parents and students in terms of attitudes towards schooling and language skills (Hommel et al. 2006). The primary cost for parents to participate in these programs, which are run in part by a not-for-profit organisation, is their time.

Home-school initiatives, such as the reading program described by Cairney (1994), may also require staff training so that they can effectively facilitate the programs. This training may increase the intellectual capital of schools but require a financial commitment from schools. While there is inconsistent and limited evidence of the effectiveness of parenting programs, a number of research studies have positive findings about the relationship between parent participation in these programs and student outcomes (Epstein and Dauber 1991; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005). Although the success of parenting programs has been shown to be influenced to a significant degree by the length of the program, effective programs can have benefits for parents’ skills, student outcomes, and the school community.

KEY FINDINGS: COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Benefits

- Parenting programs, which in Australia are generally run by agencies other than schools, generally do not create financial costs for schools.
- Queensland-based parenting programs have been shown to improve students’ and parents’ language skills and attitudes towards schooling.
- Training for teachers to facilitate parenting programs can increase the intellectual capital of schools.
- Participation in these types of programs has a positive influence on student outcomes.

Costs

- Parenting programs may require use of school facilities.

- Participation in programs may require a time commitment from parents.
- The training of teachers to facilitate these types of programs may require financial commitments from schools.

Section 3.7 Conclusion

This section offered an overview of the potential costs and benefits to schools of all forms of parent involvement described by the literature. There is a significant amount of research into different types of parental involvement and the relationships that these may have with student outcomes. Research into the costs and benefits of many types of parental involvement, however, is far more limited. Some studies have included information about the benefits to schools of involving parents in school decision-making processes (e.g. Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Gauci 2005; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006) and improving home-school communication (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Ferrara and Ferrara 2005). There is, however, very little research that examines the costs and benefits of other types of parent involvement, including parent volunteering, learning at home and the administration of parenting programs. These gaps in the research are examined in greater detail in Section 5.2 of this report. More research is needed in these areas to determine if the financial, social, intellectual and spiritual benefits of these types of parental involvement, for students, parents and the schools, outweigh the costs to schools.

Section 4 Barriers and Gateways to Parental Engagement

This section examines the barriers and gateways to parental participation in their children's education which we have identified in the literature and the case studies. Although we have found Epstein's model useful as a way of classifying and categorising the research we have examined, we also recognise its limitations. As previously noted, while parents' beliefs and expectations of education fall into Epstein's category of 'parenting,' it can be more meaningfully understood as an overarching influence on all of the categories. The influence of parents' attitudes and beliefs towards education becomes apparent when the focus turns to the gateways and barriers of parental engagement. Parental attitudes and beliefs constitute a complex domain that includes parents' beliefs of their self-efficacy and competence, their attitudes towards school and their expectations for their children (Walker et al. 2004). Parental attitudes and beliefs govern all forms of involvement whether this be volunteering or at home monitoring and assisting students with homework. Beliefs and attitudes, therefore, block or engage parents with their children's education. This review has further found that attitudes held by teachers, students and school leaders also affect parental engagement. As Warton (2001) observed, engagement between home and school is an interactive process.

Section 4.1 *The Role of the School*

Barriers

Edwards and Alldred's (2000) observation on the disjunction between the rhetoric and the reality of partnerships between school and home is a point noted by other researchers. While partnership implies an equal and respectful balance of power between teachers and parents in the education of the student, research reveals this is not always the case. Dom and Verhoeven stated that the 'consensual language' used by education researchers, including terms like such as 'partnership', 'involvement' and 'dialogue', can occasionally be misleading (Dom and Verhoeven 2006, page 570). Dom and Verhoeven further indicate that 'these terms suggest "a warm community spirit" which is not always achieved in real life. In reality parent involvement is a more diverse and complex concept than is generally acknowledged' (Dom and Verhoeven 2006, page 270). Although teachers can play a crucial role in facilitating parental involvement, research in this field also acknowledges that they have the potential to also act as barriers (Cairney and Munsie 1995; Cairney and Ruge 1999; Crozier 1997; Dom and Verhoeven 2006; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Van Voorhis 2001).

The potential for teachers to act as barriers to parental engagement has been identified in an Australian study by Cairney and Munsie (1995) as one reason for the failure of many literacy programs designed to involve parents in their children's learning. They stated that 'many teachers have negative attitudes about parents and parental involvement' (Cairney and Munsie 1995, unpaginated). The researchers further noted that 'these teachers' attitudes appear to be particularly prevalent when the parents are from lower socioeconomic groups' (Cairney and Munsie 1995, unpaginated). Cairney and Munsie's

findings have been built on by another Australian study. Gribble and Rennie (2003) examined parent and teacher perceptions in underprivileged communities and reported that many teachers perceived that ‘parents are the problem’ (Gribble and Rennie 2003, page 241). They noted that in communities with a high population of Indigenous people cultural differences can present a barrier to parental engagement and reported that teacher’s negative assumptions could alienate parents. In an Australian study of teachers, parents and students, Pryor found that ‘despite evidence to the contrary the majority of teachers agreed with the statement that the problems with most teenagers today is their parents’ lack of concern about their education’ (Pryor 1995, unpaginated). Goos et al. (2007) noted that teachers need to recognise that all parents are concerned about their children’s education, even though they might choose to be engaged in a variety of different ways and to different degrees.

The identification of teachers as potential barriers to parental involvement, however, raises the issue of teacher training and of how well prepared teachers are to communicate with and engage parents. Ferrara and Ferrara (2005) noted that there were considerable limitations in the training of pre-service and in-service teachers to effectively communicate with and involve parents in their child’s education. They noted ‘little professional development at the school or district levels that incorporate the importance of the role of parents and how classroom professionals can harness this parental power as a means of improving and sustaining student learning’ (Ferrara and Ferrara 2005, unpaginated).

Edwards and Alldred (2000) identified another potential barrier to parental involvement in the role in their child’s schooling afforded to parents by schools. They found that some schools encouraged parental involvement for disciplinary rather than educational purposes.

Gateways

Gribble and Rennie (2003) recommended the employment of parent liaison officers as a way ‘to bridge cultural knowledges’ between schools and parents, particularly when parents have different cultural backgrounds to school leaders and many of the teachers (Gribble and Rennie 2003, page 251). Schools that value cultural differences and invite parents to contribute their cultural knowledge have also been demonstrated to have increased levels of parental involvement (Goos et al. 2007). Research conducted by Saulwick Muller Social Research (2006) has also indicated some benefits of using parent liaison officers in indigenous communities. Each of these studies has offered opinions on the use of parent liaison officers in an Australian context, including the contexts of Queensland schools described in some case studies in Goos et al. (2007). While little evidence is available on the efficacy of this position in improving parent-school relations and parent involvement, anecdotal evidence in research studies and the case studies carried out for this project suggests that parent liaison officers do strengthen the ties between school, home and the community. Parent liaison officers can make use of and build on other forms of communication already used by schools to establish and strengthen links with students’ homes.

Forms of communication such as school reports, newsletters and, increasingly, email communication between parents and teachers are operational gateways to parental involvement in their children's education. Research, however, has shown that some parents are dissatisfied with the level of communication currently in place. Cuttance and Stokes (2000) found that most parents wanted more communication on the curriculum and ways that they can assist their child. Understanding the importance of these established forms of communication and improving the efficiency of their use is one action that schools can take to improve parents' knowledge of and engagement with their children's education. Improving teachers' skills in effective communication with parents and the wider community through both pre-service training and CPD has been identified by Australian research as an important factor in increasing parental engagement (Goos et al. 2007; Gribble and Rennie 2003).

Interactive homework that has been designed to engage both students and parents, is a teacher-initiated gateway proposed by Epstein and Dauber's (1991) study in the United States. These researchers have demonstrated that interactive homework can establish and improve parental involvement and has been shown to have a positive effect on student educational outcomes (Epstein and Dauber 1991). The benefits of interactive homework have been supported by other researchers, such as Van Voorhis (2001). It should be noted, however, that research into the barriers to parental involvement in these types of activities has generally examined this issue from the perspective of the teacher. Australian researchers such as Gribble and Rennie (2003) and Cairney (1994) and Cairney and Munsie (1995), all of whom have worked in the culturally sensitive areas of literacy programs, have further indicated that there is a need for a higher degree of awareness of both the dangers of treating parents as a homogenous group and of researchers and policy-makers only examining these issues from the teachers' perspectives when designing pathways to parental involvement. These Australian researchers, therefore, appear to view parents as a heterogeneous group who are capable of making a valuable contribution to the education of their children regardless of their socioeconomic or cultural background.

School leaders play a vital part in facilitating parental involvement. Dom and Verhoeven's study of four Belgian schools found that, regardless of their socioeconomic status, parents were more likely to be involved if schools and principals welcome their involvement (Dom and Verhoeven 2006). This finding is supported by the case studies of Queensland state schools, which have employed strategies to improve parent involvement, including the adoption of an open door policy where parents can drop by for informal conversations with the principal. Another strategy implemented by an ethnically diverse school provides a gateway to involvement by families from non-English speaking backgrounds. The school website is being upgraded to include pages in 12 languages which are spoken in the school community. This school also has a 24 hour home phone and text message service which enables after hours communication between home and school.

Other Queensland schools that participated in this project have developed practical measures to welcome parents and encourage parent involvement in their children's

education. Several schools encourage all staff to be friendly and welcoming to parents and visitors, particularly the staff who work in the front office and who establish the first impression of the school to parents and school visitors.

Section 4.2 *The Role of Students*

Barriers

Researchers have found that student characteristics can also operate as barriers and gateways to parental involvement in their children's education (Deslandes and Bertrand 2005; Edwards and David 1997; Englund et al. 2004; Walker et al. 2006). As previously stated, parent engagement in school-based activities decreases when their children start secondary school (Rowe 1991). Parent involvement in children's education in the home, however, may be sustained throughout all levels of education (Henderson and Mapp 2002).

Research has also attempted to examine whether student achievement variables may have an influence on parent involvement. One study by Englund et al. (2004) raised the issue of whether their child's prior achievement is the cause of some parents' involvement. Their longitudinal study showed that the mothers of students with high levels of achievement in year one were more involved in their child's education by year three than parents of children with lower achievement levels. This study makes an interesting point of comparison with the findings in Jeynes' (2005) study which showed that, in the area of homework, low student achievement was a contributing factor for increased parental involvement. These results suggest that both low and high achievement may be an influencing factor for parent involvement. The issue for policy-makers and educationalists aiming to create gateways to parental involvement, however, is for students with average levels of academic achievement, whose teachers are not concerned about their behaviour or levels of achievement, and whose parents do not feel a pressing need to be involved.

Gateways

A case study by Feiler et al. (2006) has also contributed to knowledge of the relationship between students' interest in their school work and parental engagement. This study focused on classroom activities designed to engage students' interest in their school homework and involve parents. Two activities were designed. The first included videos of classroom lessons, which parents were invited to view. In the second activity, students were supplied with disposable cameras to photograph activities at home which interested them. The researchers found a greater involvement by the parents in the activities conducted in the home, which had high levels of student engagement, than the viewing of videos of regular school activities. One third of the parents came to schools to watch the video of their children in the classroom compared to half of the parents who came into class to help put together an album of the photographs their child had taken (Feiler et al. 2006). These findings suggest that parents are more interested and involved in activities that excite and engage their children. Teachers and parents who participated in the case

studies for this project supported this finding through their reports that parents are more likely to be involved in school work and activities that interest and engage their children. Members of these school communities indicated that parents often came to the school to view work when their child was proud of their achievements. High levels of student engagement, therefore, may provide a gateway for increased parental involvement.

As noted by Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) there has been very little research into the relationship between gender and parental involvement. Their study found that girls were more welcoming of parental involvement than boys and recommended the importance of taking into account adolescent views of parental involvement activities. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) further noted that more research needs to be done into the specific challenges and opportunities posed by gender on parental involvement and student achievement.

Section 4.3 *The Role of Parents*

Barriers

Research has demonstrated that there are multiple barriers operating on parental involvement in their child's education. Parents' socioeconomic status, levels of education, expectations and choice of their children's school have all been found to have an influence on parental involvement. Low socioeconomic status has been found by researchers to be the single most important challenge to parental involvement. Low socioeconomic status has been shown to present a barrier to every aspect of parent engagement both at home and at school and to govern parents' expectations, attitudes and capacity for choice of schools (Cairney and Ruge 1999; Crozier 1997; Englund et al. 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005; Jeynes 2005). Studies such as those by Crozier (1997) and Englund et al. (2004) show that some parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds may lack the confidence and skills to be involved in areas such as homework, school governance, and effective communication with the schools. Several Australian studies have also recognised that there are numerous barriers to involvement in schools for migrant parents from a non-English speaking and lower socioeconomic background. Cairney and Munsie (1995) and Elias et al. (2006) found that parents with limited English skills were significantly less likely to be involved in school-based forms of parental involvement.

Research has also found that the educational levels of parents and their expectations for their children may influence involvement in their children's education (Englund et al. 2004; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Keith et al. 1996; Shumow and Miller 2001). These studies have demonstrated that the level of education achieved by parents is different from their socioeconomic status. Parents may have low incomes but be well-educated. The research has shown, however, that the educational level of the parents is one of the most crucial variables operating on children's achievement and parents' levels of involvement (Crozier 1997; Englund et al. 2004).

Parents' expectations and beliefs about education are other factors which have an effect on involvement but which are not necessarily related to the socioeconomic of the family. Research findings show that parents with low expectations are less likely to be involved (Crozier 1997; Walker et al. 2004). Crozier (1997), however, indicated that not only were parental expectations related to student achievement but that their expectations were a product of social class. Crozier (1997) found that parents from backgrounds, described in the study as 'working class', were less likely to be involved in their children's education, had unclear expectations of their children's educational pathways, and that their children had lower academic achievement than students from middle class backgrounds.

Time can be a barrier to parental involvement at school (Englund et al. 2004; Mji and Mbinda 2005). Working parents have difficulty finding time to participate at school during the working week. Time is also a potential barrier in the home. Working parents have less time to spend helping their children with their homework than non-working parents and may resent school demands which take them away from other forms of family interaction which may also be beneficial to student well-being.

The effect of technical language used by educationalists to exclude parents is another barrier noted by Englund et al. (2004) and Lareau (1996).

Gateways

A number of researchers have found that parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds can be empowered to have a greater choice of schools through voucher systems (Caldwell and Roskam 2002; Hoxby 2001). Parenting education programs are also widely considered to be effective methods for overcoming the barriers of low socioeconomic backgrounds, parent educational and literacy levels and parents' expectations for their child's schooling. In examining the effects of a literacy programs designed for disadvantaged parents, with high proportions of parents from non-English speaking backgrounds, researchers found that programs that encouraged parental involvement significantly improved student achievement (Cairney and Munsie 1995; Elias et al. 2006). We have noted, however, that research has found a possible correlation between the low results for literacy programs and their limited duration. Mattingly et al. (2002) concluded that US parenting programs had a negligible effect on student outcomes but also noted that the median length of time of the programs they examined was four months. A Queensland-based program, 'The Pathways Prevention Program', on the other hand, runs for two years. Research findings by Hommel et al. (2006) on this Queensland initiative have shown that children who stay in the program for more than one year have improved outcomes when they begin school.

The involvement of fathers in their children's education has also been suggested by the literature to be a gateway to enhanced parental engagement. McBride and Schoppe-Sullivan (2005) have shown that there is a significant positive relationship between father's involvement and student achievement, and noted that within the family, fathers often operated as mediator between home and schools. Although this study indicated that

mothers were generally more involved than fathers within the school, the involvement of both parents had an influence on students' overall achievement. The researchers concluded that all forms of involvement had an influence on students' academic success (McBride and Schoppe-Sullivan 2005). Research carried out by the US Department of Education (1998) concluded that fathers' involvement significantly raised their children's levels of school achievement. In response to this study, Fletcher and Silberberg (2006) investigated the degree to which Australian fathers were involved in their child's education. Their study revealed that mothers performed 80 per cent of the parents' involvement activities and that the area in which the father did participate tended to be working bees and parents' meetings (Fletcher and Silberberg 2006). Fathers were less likely to be involved in classroom activities, school canteen or helping out at sporting events. Fletcher and Silberberg (2006) concluded that more research was needed in order to identify and encourage gateways to fathers' involvement.

Section 4.4 *School Structure and Supports to Enhance Parental Involvement*

Research has demonstrated that disadvantaged parents face considerable challenges to involvement in their children's education. Australian studies have identified in-school support roles, such as parent liaison officers, as effective gateways to involve parents in challenging circumstances. The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts already has such structures and support roles in place. In Queensland linkages between home, school and the community are forged through positions such as parent liaison officers, community project officers, community partnership officers, community welfare officers, and community nutritionists.

The case studies in the second phase of the project revealed a range of strategies that are currently used in the Queensland context to involve parents. Our case studies provide an insight into the policies and practices of Queensland schools and contribute further to an understanding of the effective and practical pathways which schools have designed. These case studies have shown that school leadership is crucial in creating an environment which invites parent involvement. Simple practices for overcoming the barriers of negative parental perceptions of schools are being employed in some Queensland schools, such as encouraging staff to create a friendly and warm atmosphere for all members of the school community. Staff in the front office of schools not only create the parent's first impression of the school but have a close working relationship with parents throughout their children's schooling, and play an important role in making parents feel welcome and valued.

As our case studies reveal, schools are not homogenous, and practices that work in one school may not be as successful in a different context. For example, practices such as a website in several different languages, are effective in involving parents from non-English speaking backgrounds in one of our case study schools. These practices, however, may not be necessary for schools in which the majority of parents spoke English. The willingness to draw on parents' skills and experience is yet another practical

gateway we have identified from our case studies. In one school, the skills drawn on are in marketing and music. An understanding that the parent body contributes to the intellectual capital of schools, through skills they have learned in further education, employment or life experience, is nonetheless applicable across all schools. A number of schools described in our case studies have applied other methods of involving parents who may be reluctant or nervous about being involved in the school. One school has used volunteer Parent Class Representatives to work as a conduit between parents and members of the school leadership team and the Parents and Citizens Associations. These volunteer parent representatives are reported to overcome the communication barrier for parents who do not want to or are unable to attend school meetings. Informal parenting networks can also operate as pathways to draw other parents into being involved in their children's education. As our case studies demonstrate, these are particularly effective in small communities where there are more likely to meet and share ideas outside of school.

Key Findings of Barriers and Gateways to Parental Involvement

- Australian researchers have noted that, in communities with a comparatively high population of Indigenous people, cultural differences can present a barrier to parent engagement and reported that teacher's negative assumptions could also alienate parents.
- School leaders play an important role in fostering school spirit and inviting parent involvement and improving achievement.
- Interactive homework is one strategy that can be used to involve parents in their children's school work which research has shown to improve students' attitudes towards school.
- Schools are not homogeneous and what works in one context may not work in another. Schools need to devise local involvement strategies which take into account the specific challenges of parents in their school community.

Section 5 Overview of Literature

Section 5.1 Synthesis of Findings (What Works and Why)

This section provides an overview of all types of parental engagement identified in the literature review and case study phase of this project that offer benefits for student outcomes and schools. As previously noted, there have been few studies that have provided effective comparisons of different categories of parental engagement activities. Meta-analyses of research, such as Fan and Chen (1999), Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001) and Henderson and Mapp (2002), have offered overviews of research but have not identified any *best practice* policies and programs that may be used by schools to enhance parental engagement.

As the case studies of Queensland state schools have shown, schools may use a range of different practices to enhance parental engagement for their school community. While the schools involved in these case studies have reported the success of their practices in their school context, there is not evidence to support the claim that these practices can be successfully applied in other school settings. Information from these case studies and the literature has been used to identify the following practices that may lead to improvements in student outcomes.

Type 1 Parenting

- There is general agreement among researchers that parenting expectations and beliefs about education influence their involvement in their children's education and are important indicators of student success (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Shumow and Miller 2001; Walker et al. 2004).
- Research has found that the parent's education level is a reliable indicator of their involvement in their child's education level and of student outcomes (Crozier 1997; Englund 2004; Keith et al. 1996; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Shumow and Miller 2001).
- Disadvantaged parents have specific challenges to involvement but schools can work to overcome these at a local level (Crozier 1997; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006).

Type 2 Communication

- Studies of early childhood and primary students have suggested that higher levels of parent-teacher interaction can be beneficial for student outcomes (Cuttance and

Stokes 2000; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Hughes and MacNaughton 2001; Kelly 2001; Knopf and Swick 2007).

- International research has found that the quality and effectiveness is more important than the frequency of home-school communication (Kohl et al. 2000).
- Greater information about special programs and activities in the school can have benefits for student outcomes (Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001).
- Communication of the values and attitudes about life and learning can have benefits for the school's spiritual capital and can increase parental engagement, which holds benefits for both parents and the school (Van Galen 1997).
- Training teachers to effectively communicate with parents can increase the intellectual capital of the school (Ferrara and Ferrara 2005).

Type 3 Volunteering

- Australian and international research has shown that volunteering activities that take place on the school site and in contact with other members of the school community have a positive relationship with improved student outcomes, including increases in student motivation, engagement and retention, and decreases in disruptive behaviour (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006).
- By sharing their knowledge and skills, parents who volunteer can increase the school's intellectual capital (Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999; Hunter 1989, cited in Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004).
- Parent volunteering in school-based activities can also increase the social capital of the school, which has been identified as having a relationship with improved student outcomes. (Caldwell and Spinks 2008).
- School leaders can play an important role in fostering school spirit and inviting parental involvement (Dom and Verhoeven 2006; Gauci 2005; Saulwick Miller Social Research 2006).

Type 4 Learning at Home

- While research has not conclusively shown that parental involvement in homework improves student achievement, there is strong evidence to suggest that parental involvement in homework improves student behaviour and motivation in the classroom (Epstein, Simon and Salinas 1997; Henderson and Mapp 2005).

- Australian and international researchers have found positive benefits to children's literacy when parents participate in literacy learning (Cairney 1994; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Jones and Rowley 1990; Mayfield and Ollila 1992; Rowe 1991; Spreadbury 1995).
- Interactive homework is one strategy to involve parents in their children's school work which research has shown to improve students' attitudes towards school (Van Voorhis 2001).

Type 5 Decision-Making

- Parents' participation in school decision-making processes can have benefits for the school by creating a collaborative and open school environment and gaining vital feedback from members of the school community (Epstein and Connors-Tadros 1999; Hood and LoVette 2002; Van Galen 1997).
- Participation in school governance processes can increase parents' social networks and provide them with planning and managerial skills (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006).
- Parental participation in school governance offers parents the opportunity to have a feeling of ownership of school decisions. This provides benefits to the parents and the schools, as it has the potential to increase both the school's social and financial capital (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006).

Type 6 Collaborating with the Community

- International and Australian research which has found a positive relationship between parenting programs and improved student outcomes suggests that parenting programs which are sensitive to the cultural needs and values of the parents can be effective. (Bowes 2002; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Henderson 1987; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Hommel et al. 2006; Jeynes 2005).

Section 5.2 *Gaps, Inconsistencies and Limitations of the Literature*

This report has identified a number of gaps, limitations, and inconsistencies in the research on parental engagement in schools. Early research studies in the field were based on opinion rather than a solid evidence base. Much of the early research examined parental engagement as a unitary concept, rather than as a range of activities that could have different effects on student outcomes. Although research on parental involvement has been refined and currently includes both qualitative and quantitative evidence for its findings, there are still contradictory findings in all categories of involvement. The inconsistent findings of the literature are particularly evident in studies pertaining to the relationship between involvement and student achievement. In the volunteering category,

for example, findings about parents' activities in the school and classroom ranged from having a positive correlation to student achievement (Cuttance and Stokes 2000; Darch, Miao and Shippen 2004; Feiler et al. 2006; Munoz 2000; Sanders and Epstein 2000), to no identification of any relationship (Harris and Goodall 2006). The involvement of parents in homework, parental choice of school, as well as parenting programs, are other areas investigated by researchers which have yielded similar conflicting results as to their effects on student educational outcomes.

As described in Section 1.3, the lack of consistent and comprehensive definitions for all types of parental involvement has been a source of inconsistencies in various research studies. We chose to use Epstein's (1995) framework to organise the research into six categories of parental involvement, as it is the most frequently used and comprehensive model in this area. As with other models of parental engagement, Epstein's model has some limitations. The Australian family-school partnerships project indicated that Epstein's framework was limited as it only considered parental involvement from the perspective of the school (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). The researchers extended the model to include other categories of involvement from the student and parents' perspectives.

We have found that the inclusion of parental attitudes towards schooling in the 'parenting' category is another limitation of Epstein's model. Parents' attitudes towards and expectations of education have been shown in research to have an impact on all types of parental involvement (Englund et al. 2004; Falbo, Lein and Amador 2001; Harris and Goodall 2006; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005; Walker et al. 2004). Furthermore, unlike other forms of participation, parents' attitudes towards education are not actions that may be readily observed and measured by others. Researchers can measure how frequently a parent reads to their child or participates in school decision-making processes, but it is more difficult to accurately measure parents' attitudes and beliefs.

The category of communication has similar limitations to the categorisation of parental attitudes. Communication has been described as the 'single most important factor in getting parents engaged' (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22). Three-quarters of the parents in the Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros (1999) study indicated that a lack of home-school communication was the primary reason that they were not more involved in their child's education. While 'communication' may relate to particular activities, such as the provision of school reports, the effectiveness of home-school interaction has an influence on all types of parental engagement.

We noted limitations in the methodology of a number of studies which we examined. The quantitative research tended to be limited to correlational studies. While quantitative research does identify relationships between variables, it does not show cause and effect. Although the identification of relationships between variables is important in uncovering previously overlooked or unknown patterns, they should be used as the basis for future investigation and not as a conclusion of cause or effect. Further study may include

qualitative research to provide comprehensive and compelling evidence of the cause and effect of the relationship.

Many of the studies do not deal with variables that may be associated with student achievement, such as students' prior achievement and socioeconomic background. The focus has been on those variables that can be changed or overcome. There are, however, student variables that cannot be changed by increased access to programs or facilities, such as students' intelligence. Bacete and Ramirez state that:

Intelligence and intellectual aptitudes are the factors concerning achievement most studied and one of the most stable when predicting achievement. The variance in achievement accounted for by intelligence alone is estimated at around 35%.

(Bacete and Ramirez 2001, page 534)

Although some studies have acknowledged such variables, it is virtually impossible to control for all of the variables that may be a factor in students' academic achievement.

The data collection methods used in some studies are a further limitation for research into parental engagement. Self-reporting questionnaires are often used by researchers to collect the opinions of parents and teachers about the effectiveness of parent involvement in improving their children's education. While self-reporting remains an appropriate research method for the measurement of many aspects of parental engagement, research studies should highlight the limitations, including the subjectivity of the data collected. We recommend that when self-reports are used that multiple perspectives of the same activities and beliefs are included.

Gaps in the research have been noted in the discussion of each of the categories. There are a limited number of Australian studies that examine parental engagement and even fewer studies that have been carried out in the Queensland setting. Research, for example, has mentioned that parents' time may be a barrier to their involvement in their children's education, and yet no study has directly examined the relationship between the time that parents have available and their participation in different types of involvement. A focused and systematic study of the influence of time on parental involvement is needed.

The case study phase of this project has also raised a number of questions about parental involvement which have not been examined in the research reported in the first phase of the project. The distance travelled to the school and its effect on parental involvement in activities at the school have not been the subject of sustained investigation. This variable is particularly important to understanding the regional Queensland context and the barriers operating on parents who travel significant distances to attend meetings and volunteer their skills.

Limited acknowledgment is made in the research of the effect of caring for babies and small children on parental involvement. While parenting meetings are often conducted in the evening to ensure that working parents can attend, this has created different barriers

for parents with small children, and single parents. Other issues which are raised by, but not examined in, the research gaps include whether working parents participate in their child's schooling less than non-working parents, and whether the social networks of parents who are active in their children's schools may encourage or discourage other parents from participating. These questions are all pertinent to the Queensland context and have not been a focus of previous research. An examination of the relationship between parents' time spent on their child's education and a range of parent variables, including employment status and geographical location, may provide additional information to understand parental engagement in the Queensland context.

More research is required to understand the reasons behind the conflicting perspectives of parents and teachers. Research has shown some teachers perceive interacting with parents as difficult (Goos et al. 2007; Gribble and Rennie 2003; Lareau and Horvat 1999). The Australian Education Union was cited in an article in *The Sunday Age* that reported teacher experience of harassment and 'cyber-bullying' from the parents of their students (Gough 2007). Inadequate attention seems to be given in initial teacher education to building partnerships with parents (Ferrara and Ferrara 2005; Hango in press). Research has not dealt adequately with how teachers can be trained to communicate more effectively with parents or to view parents as partners in their students' education. Studies from the United States are primarily based on school-directed parent involvement. It is noteworthy to observe that Australian studies have recognised that, in order to create parent partnerships, home-school interaction 'needs to change from occasional, one-way and socio-culturally homogenous communication to frequent, two-way and culturally sensitive interaction' (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006, page 22).

Section 6: Case Studies of Parental Involvement in Queensland State Schools

Ten case studies of Queensland state schools were conducted by Dr Jessica Harris and Professor Brian Caldwell in the second phase of this project. These schools provide exemplars of current policies and practice used in Queensland schools to enhance parental engagement and provide concrete examples how the different types of parental engagement activities, described in the research, are managed in a Queensland context.

We have organised the case studies according to Epstein's (1995) model in order to show clearly how each schools' policies and practices effect the different types of parental engagement.

Section 6.1 Methodology for Case Studies

Education Queensland, in consultation with Educational Transformations, selected ten state schools to participate in the case study phase of this project. The schools were selected according to three criteria: the size and type of the school, the geographic location and the socioeconomic levels of the school community.

1) School size and type

It was agreed that examples of practice should be taken from Primary Schools (P-7), Secondary Schools (8-12) and P-12 combined Primary-Secondary Schools. A range of these types of schools were included in the final selection, including a P-10 school. A mix of large and small schools was included in the sample. The definitions used to determine size of schools were:

- (a) small – more than 25 students and less than 250 students except for rural, where all school sizes were considered
- (b) larger – more than 350 students

2) Geographic location.

Where possible, the sample of schools included a mix of schools from metropolitan, provincial, rural and remote areas. Due to sample size limitations, time constraints and travel time associated with accessing remote schools, no remote schools were included in this sample. To minimise travel time it was agreed that school selection should be based around three clusters – the South-East corner of Queensland; Cairns coastal/tablelands; and the Wide Bay region.

Consideration was given to schools that received 'Showcase Awards for Excellence in Schools' for programmes to enhance parental engagement and community partnerships. Two of these showcase schools were included in the final sample.

3) Socioeconomic level

It was agreed that socioeconomic data also be considered in the selection of schools, acknowledging that schools in all socioeconomic settings can implement successful programs to enhance parental engagement. Education Queensland determined the socioeconomic levels of school communities using IRSED data. The scale used is:

- (a) High = Higher or Middle High
- (b) Low = Low or Middle Low

Education Queensland used student and parent opinion surveys as primary criteria in the selection of sample schools for this study. Student and parent opinion surveys are used to gauge satisfaction with key aspects of schools. Data are collected annually from specially designed representative samples of parents and students at each Education Queensland school in the state. The surveys were first administered in 1997.

The mean satisfaction scores are calculated by using the scale:

- 0 (very dissatisfied)
- 1 (dissatisfied)
- 2 (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, neutral)
- 3 (satisfied)
- 4 (very satisfied).

The following provides a broad interpretation of the mean ratings:

- 0.00 to 0.80 very dissatisfied
- 0.81 to 1.60 dissatisfied
- 1.61 to 2.40 neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 2.41 to 3.20 satisfied
- 3.21 to 4.00 very satisfied

The mean aggregated rating for questions on the *Parent Opinion Survey* which relate to school-community relations were considered in the selection of sample schools. The questions included in this section are:

Thinking back over the school year, generally, how satisfied are you.....

- (c) *that school staff are approachable when you want to talk about your child?*
- (d) *that you have opportunities to participate in the life of the schools?*
- (e) *that you have opportunities to participate in school decision making?*
- (f) *with opportunities you have to participate in decisions about the school?*
- (g) *that the school makes you feel welcome?*

All schools with a mean rating higher than 3 were considered. Where possible, the two schools with the highest mean rating from each cluster were considered for inclusion in this study.

Due to the small sample size of the case studies (10 schools), it is not possible to generalise from the findings. Rather, these schools were selected to provide examples of the programs and processes that are currently used in a variety of Queensland state schools. In order to provide the greatest variety of state schools in Queensland, all schools that received high ratings on the parent opinion surveys and at least two other criteria were considered for inclusion. The final selection of schools is detailed in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Characteristics of Case Study Schools

1	Primary school in a high socioeconomic area in a Metropolitan region
1	Secondary school in a high socioeconomic area in a Metropolitan region
1	Primary school in a low socioeconomic area in a Metropolitan region
1	Secondary school in a low socioeconomic area in a Metropolitan region
1	Primary/ (P-12) school in a Provincial region
1	Secondary/(P-12) school in a Provincial region
2	Primary/ (P-12) school in a Rural region
1	Secondary/ (P-12) school in a Rural region
0	Primary/ (P-12) school in a Remote region; Secondary/ (P-12) school in a Remote region
1	Special school
10	Total Number of Case Studies

Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis for all schools and members of school communities. Following the nomination of school sites by Education Queensland, Educational Transformations made contact with school leaders to request their participation. At that time, the individual school leaders were notified that the in-school data collection process, including one-on-one and focus group interviews with key stakeholders in the school community, would be carried out over one day within their school. School leaders were sent consent forms, outlining their rights and responsibilities for their involvement in this research and a set of information sheets and consent forms to inform participants of the study and their rights if they chose to participate. All school leaders contacted by Educational Transformations agreed to the inclusion of their school in the case study phase of this project. Each school leader chose to approach key stakeholders in their school community to request their participation in this study.

In undertaking these case studies, one researcher from Educational Transformations, either Professor Brian Caldwell or Dr Jessica Harris, visited each of the selected schools.

A one-on-one interview was carried out with each of the school principals in order to gain contextual information about the school and information about the policies and processes that the schools have implemented to enhance parental engagement. Key stakeholders, including members of school staff, parents and, in some cases, students at the schools volunteered their participation in either interviews or focus group settings. Each participant received an information sheet describing the process and purpose of the study and provided written consent for their participation. Student participants provided both their written consent to participate in the study and the consent of their parent or guardian.

Most of the discussions with school staff were undertaken in an interview setting in order to ensure minimal disruption to the school during the case study research. Due to time constraints, the majority of discussions with parents took place in a focus group setting, which enabled parents to discuss the parental engagement activities that take place in their schools between themselves and with the researcher. Where possible, focus groups of students were also included in the case study research to provide their opinions on parental involvement in their school.

The researchers discussed the following areas in each of the interview and focus groups for these case studies:

- The different types of parental engagement programs and processes in the school.
- The impact of all types of parent engagement programs and processes on student outcomes, including academic achievement, behaviour, attendance and motivation.
- The variables associated with parental participation in parental engagement programs and processes, such as student age and family backgrounds.
- The costs and benefits to the school and school staff of parental engagement programs and processes.
- The support available to school staff to enhance parental engagement in students' learning.
- The barriers to parental engagement in school communities.
- The strategies used to enhance parental engagement in the school.

Section 6.2 School 1:

Summary

This case study describes the policies and practices employed to enhance parental engagement at a large secondary school, with students from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants in this study described that one of the major barriers to parental involvement in this school is the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school community. To overcome the language barrier between the school and families, the school has identified 12 languages that are most commonly spoken by members of the school and provides communication to families, through letters, the school website and translation services for face-to-face interactions in a choice of these languages.

In addition to traditional methods of home-school communication, such as report cards, parent-teacher interviews and phone calls to let parents know how their child is progressing at school, this school has embraced the use of modern technologies. Parents and the school are now able to provide particular information through email and text messaging services. The school has established a strong system of experienced teachers, department heads and school leaders to support any teachers who do not feel comfortable or able to effectively communicate with parents.

Students reported that their parents are less involved in school activities at this secondary school than they were in their primary schools. Teachers suggested that parents may feel that volunteering or other involvement in school activities is not necessary or wanted by children when they reach secondary school. The teaching staff also noted that parents whose children are experiencing difficulties at school are less likely to be involved in school activities. All participating students, however, reported that their parents were still actively involved in supporting their education at home, particularly in the upper-secondary years of schooling.

Case Study

Context

This school is a large secondary school with around 1 600 students from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds in a Brisbane suburb. There are around 120 teachers employed at the school. Four deputy principals and a team of support staff assist the principal with the school administration. Students travel from surrounding suburbs and the southern areas of Brisbane to attend the high school. This school has an extremely high level of cultural diversity, with up to 57 languages spoken by members of the school community. The effective communication between staff and parents at this school is a significant challenge due to this cultural and linguistic diversity.

Communication

A number of measures have been instated by the school to assist with home-school communication. The school has identified twelve languages that are the most commonly spoken or understood by students and their parents. The Principal reported that the schools' website is currently being updated so that all of the school information can be accessed in each of these twelve identified languages. She stated that all parents are asked at the beginning of their association with the school to nominate one of these twelve languages as the language in which all school information is conveyed. Student report cards and letters sent home to parents are produced in multiple languages so that parents can receive information in the language that they have nominated. The language barrier is overcome in parent-teacher interviews and any face-to-face communication between parents and teachers through the use of translation services, which are provided by the school at no charge to the parents.

Modern technologies have been embraced by this school to assist with various forms of communication with the school community. Teachers who participated in this study described a 24-hour phone and text message line, which has been established so that parents can call or send a text message at any time to notify the school of student absences. Conversely, a system has been implemented so that parents automatically receive a text message if their child is absent without an explanation. One challenge that has been faced by the school is that these text messages can only be produced in English. Parents who have nominated to receive information from the school in a language other than English are also sent a letter in their nominated language to explain the content of these text messages.

Teachers who participated in interviews for this research also reported that email is frequently used by members of the school staff to communicate with parents about curricular and extra-curricular school activities. Many teachers at this school provide parents and students with their email address and ask parents to provide them with both individual and home email addresses. The 'read receipt' function, which provides teachers with an automatic reply to let them know when their emails have been opened, was described as particularly useful for teachers. With this function, teachers are notified when parents receive the information that they have been sent. This function overcomes the concern that parents may not receive notices when they are sent home in other ways. Teachers expressed the opinion that notes sent home with students could often be forgotten, lost or otherwise overlooked and parents may not receive important information. Email communication enables teachers to easily contact individual parents or groups of parents far more quickly than traditional mail would allow.

The school uses a number of standard letters to communicate with parents where necessary. The administration team is responsible for letters to notify parents of student absences and when students are considered to be 'at risk' of falling behind in their classes. A new system has been instituted where the school sends letters to parents of all students who do not pass English and/ or mathematics. These letters are sent by the principal, who requests a meeting with both the student in question and their parent(s). In

cases where students do not pass English or mathematics, they may be required to re-sit that subject level without necessarily impeding their progression to the next grade.

Teachers are given access to all of their students' home telephone numbers and addresses through the school's computer network. This enables each teacher to send a letter, which has been produced by the school, or telephone parents to notify them if their child does not submit assignments or homework on time. The teachers interviewed for this study reported that in the majority of cases parents were pleased to be informed if their child was not submitting required work or was behaving badly in the classroom. Both teachers and students who participated in these interviews noted that this style of parent-teacher communication was not always welcomed by students as they may be disciplined at home as well as at school for their behaviour at school.

According to the principal, some teachers at the school do not feel comfortable in their ability to effectively communicate with parents. In these cases, teachers may ask the head of their academic department to contact parents on their behalf. Heads of Departments may also be asked to contact parents who have been hostile with teachers in previous communications. In rare cases where parents have repeatedly shown hostility, the principal makes all contact personally. These parents are asked to contact the principal directly if they have any questions or concerns about their child's schooling, rather than contacting or visiting their child's classroom. The principal reported that recent developments in Queensland enables the school to request that parents who are difficult or hostile on school grounds can be asked to leave the site and only return to speak with the principal. No requests of this type have been required at this school.

Volunteering

The principal reported that while only a small proportion of parents were involved in the Parents and Citizens Association, this group was extremely active in their support of the school. None of the parents of students who participated in this case study were actively involved in the Parents and Citizens Association, although many of their parents had volunteered to participate in school activities when they were in primary school.

Parenting and Learning at Home

Although students in the focus group reported a decrease in the level of their parents' participation in many activities at the school, they indicated that all parents were active in assisting in their education at home. The most frequently reported type of parental involvement at home was motivation and assistance with homework and school assignments. Students described a range of strategies used by their parents to ensure that homework was completed. These students reported that their parents often questioned them about school work and would offer them an alternative of doing an undesirable chore at home if they were struggling for motivation to complete their school tasks. Parents and siblings were reported to assist these students in formatting, researching, structuring and proof-reading school assignments. Four of the seven participating students stated that their parents had assisted them in their schooling by arranging outside

tutoring for their final year of secondary school. One student revealed that when he began experiencing difficulties at his previous school, his parents were active in selecting a new school for his upper-secondary school.

Aside from assistance with homework and school assignments the parents of these students were highly involved in supporting their interests and helping with their choice of post-school destinations. The majority of students reported that their parents had taken them to a 'Careers Expo' to look at choices for tertiary education and employment. Parents were also supportive of these students' interests by taking them to concerts, driving them to extra-curricular activities and attending school events, including music and theatre performances and school sports. Each of these students reported that they discussed their interests and problems at school with their parents and that their parents supported them when they were having difficulties. These reports were consistent for all parents, including those who did not live with their child. Parents, siblings and peers were described as a support network for students to assist them with a range of difficulties at school. These students stated that they regularly sought assistance with school work from peers and older siblings, who they reported had a better understanding of the content and what was required. Help was most often sought from parents, however, in motivating students and reducing the stress associated with the final year of school. All of these students reported that their parents placed a great deal of importance on their secondary education, which they found to be a source of motivation. The students stressed that the type of parental involvement which was most valuable to them was this type of motivation and the support that their parents provide.

Barriers and Gateways

As previously noted, students' reports of parental involvement reflected the findings of Henderson and Mapp, who stated that as students progress in their education 'involvement at home remains steady while there is decreased involvement in school over time' (Henderson and Mapp 2002, page 30). Each student reported that although their parents were involved in school-based activities while they were in primary school, such as volunteering in the classroom, assisting with fundraising and coaching sports teams, this style of participation had decreased once the students had reached secondary school. The students' reports of lower levels of parental participation in secondary school were also voiced by the principal and participating teachers.

Furthermore, teachers reported that a majority of those parents who are involved with the school have children who were not having problems in school. Teachers stated that they have the most contact with parents of students who were not having problems at school. They reported contact with the parents of students who were having problems at school was often limited to sending notices home to report missed assignments, misbehaviour or absenteeism. Despite this observation, teachers were cautious about making the connection between the involvement of these parents and student outcomes. They noted that the most involved parents did not necessarily have children who were achieving high academic results. Rather, these students were most likely to be highly motivated and involved in a range of school activities themselves. Teachers suggested that parents'

involvement may inspire their children to become more involved. It was also suggested that parents of students who were having problems at school may be reticent about communicating with the school as they may feel that they will receive negative reports about their child's achievement or behaviour.

These teachers also offered a range of possible explanations for why some parents may not participate more actively at school. One English teacher indicated that although the school would appreciate parent volunteers to assist students in class with their literacy, parents may perceive that this is not as necessary in secondary school as it is in primary. Teachers reported that many parents seem unsure of their ability to assist students with their school work in secondary school, particularly in the upper secondary levels. Changes in course content and teaching methods together with the use of new technologies means that secondary school can seem daunting to parents as it is different from their school experience. Students also indicated that the cultural diversity of the school community may limit parents' understanding of the Queensland secondary system. Of the seven students who participated in this study, two reported that their parents completed school in another country and another two reported that their parents did not complete upper secondary. These parents, therefore, may not understand the curriculum, content and pedagogy used in teaching upper secondary school in Queensland.

The organisation of secondary schooling may also create a challenge for parents to be active in their child's education. Fundraising activities that are used in primary schools, like fetes, do not take place at this secondary school. The principal noted that a major difference between primary and secondary schools is that primary teachers teach their students, whereas in secondary school teachers teach their subject. Students in secondary school may have up to seven different teachers. Secondary teachers may have a number of different classes each week. This organisation makes it more difficult for parents and teachers of secondary students to form a relationship. In acknowledgement of this difficulty, the school has put measures in place to assist parents. Heads of Departments may be actively involved in parent-teacher communication when students are experiencing difficulties in a particular subject area. The school has also included information for parents on how to help their students in the outlines for each subject offered.

Section 6.3 School 2

Summary

This case study describes the parental involvement activities in a small primary school in a high socioeconomic area in Brisbane. Although the school is still small, it has had growing enrolments after facing a period of declining enrolments and facing difficulties with staff retention.

In the first two years of his employment, the current acting principal has placed a significant emphasis on re-building the community's trust in the school. He has

implemented an open-door policy and promotes informal communication between parents and school staff. Parents are encouraged to visit and participate in school activities at any time during the school day. The school staff offer activities for parents and students from the lower primary grades before school and hold regular school and social events for families. A number of parents have volunteered their services and used their professional knowledge and skills to support the school.

This school recognises that parents may not have a lot of time to assist their child's school, or may prefer not to work on a committee with other parents. Parents are asked by the school to be involved in the school in any way that is convenient or comfortable for them. Participating parents indicated that they are motivated to be involved in the school by seeing the dedication of the school staff.

The school statistics demonstrate that many parents drive past two or more government primary schools to bring their child to this school. The school is promoted as a 'school of choice'. Parents reported that they were actively involved in researching and selecting this school for their children. One reason for their selection of this school, which was also offered as an explanation for the level of parental engagement, is the small, informal and friendly school atmosphere.

Case Study

Context

School 2 is a primary school around five kilometres south of the Brisbane CBD. This school has around 160 pupils enrolled in multi-age classrooms with a total of eight teaching staff. Despite its proximity to Brisbane city, this school is set on a large area of land. The 12 acres of land includes a tropical fruit garden and areas of bush land. The school community has been active in a number of conservation projects that have been integrated into students' learning. While clearing the area of lantana and other weeds, students participated in a university competition on understanding weeds and native vegetation.

Prior to 2005, this school was experiencing a number of difficulties in its relationships with the community. While this has always been a small school, the enrolments were being reduced by about 20 students per year. The school was also facing problems in retaining staff. The number of teachers was reduced from nine to a low of four with only 112 students enrolled. It was reported that there was a perception among the school community that the school was not performing well, although corporate data indicates otherwise. The current acting principal was employed to re-establish links with the community and rebuild trust in the school. As the literature on social capital indicates, the strength of formal and informal networks can be easily broken if there is a feeling of distrust or disharmony in the community. The trust in these networks, however, is far more difficult to rebuild.

Communication

Effective communication with parents and the community has been vital to the success of the school in rebuilding its social capital. The acting principal used a number of strategies to make parents feel comfortable in approaching the school. He indicated that parents could contact him at any time at the school and come to his office to discuss any issues, suggestions or simply to have an informal conversation. Throughout 2005, his first year in the role, the acting principal reported that a number of parents would regularly come to his office to speak with him. While these were generally informal conversations he reported that this gave him a chance to become acquainted with a large number of parents in the school community. The parents, on the other hand, were given the opportunity to meet the new acting principal and to understand his role and methods. In the early stages of this role, he ensured that all suggestions from parents were taken into consideration and received prompt responses. This included the suggestions of one parent, a hair dresser, who was concerned about information that the school provided on the problem of head-lice. This parent was asked to suggest some alternative methods that parents could use to deal with the issue. The school then included her suggestions as a feature in the next school newsletter and changed their policies for reporting head-lice within the school. These types of activities were considered vital in changing the home-school relationship, as parents had previously expressed that the school did not always listen to or act on their concerns.

One action used by the new administration was to contact a Brisbane television news program, which was broadcasting weather reports from various locations. By participating in this weather broadcast, staff were hoping to familiarise the local community with the school, which is not on a major thoroughfare and may be overlooked in an area with a number of government primary schools, many of which are larger and positioned on major roads. The school staff decided to use the television broadcast as an opportunity to reconnect the school and community. It was decided to use the ready made audience and have an informal information evening and ‘sausage sizzle’ with members of the school community. Each of the seven full-time teaching staff gave a short presentation to the parents and students who attended the evening. This enabled all parents, teachers and students to become familiar with the activities that were taking place at every level of the primary school. The acting principal described this informal evening, which occurred in around the fourth week of the first term, as an important factor in the re-establishment of links between the school and home. Teachers and parents have also indicated that the transparency of school practices and communication between parents and the school is a primary reason for the high level of parent involvement in school activities.

The small size of this school enables communication between teachers and parents. Teachers report using traditional methods of communication with parents, such as providing report cards, school newsletters and phoning parents if students are experiencing difficulties with their school work or having problems in school. There is, however, also a high level of informal communication that occurs within the school. Teachers report that they regularly have the opportunity to speak with parents both within

and outside the classroom. The school assists parents of students in the prep year to arrange Friday afternoon drinks and schedule play-dates between students. This gives both parents and students an opportunity to extend their social network and to get to know other new members of the school community.

Teachers and teacher-aides in the lower school also provide activities for students and parents before the beginning of each school day. A number of parents stay with their child until school begins and participate in these activities on the computers, in the classrooms or outdoor areas, which are designed to prepare students for the day ahead. In week 10 of the first term each year the school holds an evening that gives parents the opportunity to meet with teachers to find out how their child is managing in their new class and the new school year. Parents reported that this was a highly successful initiative, particularly for parents who are new to the school, as teachers and parents are able to gain insight into another perspective of how the child is settling into their new classroom environment and provides motivation to parents to participate in school activities. Holding this evening early in the year also provides parents with early feedback on any problems that their child may be having. Parents are also given the opportunity to have formal parent-teacher interviews, although those who participated in this study indicated that they didn't feel that these were always necessary as the high level of informal communication helps parents in knowing how their child is performing throughout the school year.

Volunteering

One method of enhancing informal home-school communication used by the school is to encourage parents to visit and participate in classroom activities at any time during the school day. In interviews for this study, parents reported that they feel able to assist in the classroom whenever they have time available. They described their participation in a range of learning activities, such as helping students with reading and writing or assistance in specific academic programs, where they have knowledge. A school philosophy, reported by the acting principal, is that all parents have the ability to help the students and can assist in classroom activities. A 'culmination' evening is also held once a term at which parents are invited to the school to view the children's work. Parents indicated that the students are always excited by the opportunity to share the activities and show their work. They believe that the high level of student engagement and excitement is the primary reason for the high level of parent attendance at these 'culmination' evenings.

In addition to parents' volunteering in the classroom and attendance at evenings to view their children's work, this school community appears to be adept at identifying the talents and skills of the parents and drawing on these resources. In 2005, for example, two parents who worked in the field of marketing volunteered their services to the school and produced a poster with pictures of students that can be displayed in the school or at events in which the school or staff participate. They also created promotional cards that describe the school's activities and philosophies, with particular attention given to the school's philosophy of respecting the individuality of each child. One parent, who

participated in the interviews for this study, uses his skills in IT to provide technical support for the computers used at the school and regularly updates the information available on the Parents and Citizens Associations page of the website. Another parent, who is a talented musician, offers his services in teaching interested students to play the cello at no cost to the school. In discussions of these types of active parental participation it was noted that some parents prefer to support the school in other ways that do not require a regular, substantial time commitment or prefer not to work in committees. For example, a number of families assist in maintaining the large school grounds, as the school does not have funding for a groundskeeper. Parents are asked to participate as partners in their involvement with the school by being involved in any way that is convenient or comfortable for them. The acting principal reported that at an end-of-year function for all families that actively assisted the school around 40 per cent of the school community was present.

Parenting and Learning at Home

One of the school's mottos is that it is a 'school of choice, not of convenience'. Members of the Parents and Citizens Association reported that only 50 per cent of students enrolled in the school lived within the designated catchment area. Around 55 per cent of parents drive past two or more government primary schools in order to take their child to this school. Both parents and the acting principal suggested that making the choice to send their child to this school, rather than a more conveniently located government school, may be a reason for the high levels of parental satisfaction. The active research and selection of the right school for their child is a form of parental engagement in children's learning, which has been described in the 'parenting' category in Epstein's framework. The parents involved in interviews noted that the time they spent in selecting a school for their child may be a measure of the value that they place on their child's education. Furthermore, they proposed that parents who were engaged in the choice of school were more likely to be active in other areas of their children's education.

The triennial school review committee, which consists of representatives from the school staff, students' parents and the wider community, conducted a survey of parents asking why they chose to send their child to this school. The most frequent reason for their selection was that parents felt that this school nurtured their child as an individual. The respect for every child's individuality is a philosophy that is strongly held by members of the school and a basis for the decision to teach multi-age classes.

Costs and Benefits

The acting principal reported the belief that multi-age classes can serve as a reminder to teachers that every student is different and has different levels of ability. The teachers in this school are highly supportive of the use of multi-age classrooms and philosophy of teaching the child as an individual. Their focus is to provide classes and activities that are interesting and engaging for all of the students in the school, not just those within their own class. Parents reported that the motivation and dedication of the teachers in engaging every student inspires many parents to get involved in the school. During the visit to the

school there were two examples of the respect shared by teachers, parents and students. One teacher from the upper primary classes, who participated in this study, had organised an activity for students in prep and grades one to three. It was also discovered on this day that another teacher had won a newspaper-run competition for 'my favourite teacher'. The winner of this competition, run by a large local newspaper, was determined by the number of votes that they had received from members of the school community. Despite the small size of the school and the fact that the school had not coordinated parent voting in this competition, members of this school community had submitted the largest number of entries of any school. The teacher's success in this competition not only reflects her individual dedication and talent, but more generally the school's commitment to its students, and to creating a warm and welcoming environment.

Barriers and Gateways

One parent suggested that many parents were actively involved with the school for personal reasons and that her participation in 'at school' activities stemmed from discovering that her child had learning difficulties. She reported that as a result of these learning difficulties she began to be actively involved in supporting her child's learning, at home and at the child's previous school, which did not have the resources or support available to accommodate the recommendations of a specialist consultant. This parent ultimately chose to change her child's school. She states that the multi-age learning environment and small constant teaching staff at this school were able to accommodate her child's individual learning needs and have helped him catch up and overcome his learning difficulties. As a result of the school's support of her child's learning needs, she has been more involved in the school in other ways, such as participating in the Parents and Citizens Association. Although the literature has not found any evidence to support a correlation between different types of parental involvement, the parents at this school have found that their participation in the school has progressively increased as they have become more aware of the needs of the school and the students.

All participants in this study, including the acting principal, teachers and parents, offered the opinion that another factor in the high level of participation at this school was the informal basis on which it is run. Although there are formal structures within the school, such as the Parents and Citizens Association, there is a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Parents are not often required to make an appointment to speak with their child's teacher or the acting principal, as contact is freely encouraged when time permits. In a small school with few formal structures, new suggestions and changes to school activities or policies can be implemented quickly. The acting principal is often involved in assisting members of the Parents and Citizens Association in implementing ideas that need to be passed through an official body. All participants in this case study indicate that this flexibility and support with formal structures makes being involved in the school less daunting for many parents. Furthermore, parents report that the flexibility and friendliness of this small school encourages parents, who may not otherwise have been involved, to participate in school activities.

Section 6.4 School 3

Summary

The school examined in this case study is a large primary school on the Sunshine Coast that maintains a strong relationship with the community. The school administration has created strong links with local businesses and organisations, which support and are supported by the school.

This school uses traditional forms of home-school communication, including these newsletters, regular school reports and parent-teacher interviews, to ensure that parents know how their child is progressing. In addition, the school offers additional meetings to inform parents of any significant changes to the school, such as the new reporting system that has been recently implemented. Parents and family members are also invited, at least once a term, to come to events held for each grade level to showcase the students' work.

Numerous parents and community members volunteer in the school. Parents reported that their involvement is encouraged by the friendly, welcoming and community-oriented atmosphere of the school. Parents also indicated that a major benefit of their volunteering at the school is that it gives them a greater understanding of their child's educational progress and school experience. Each class also has a volunteer parent representative, who facilitates contact between the parents of students in that class and the school administration. Parents reported that the parent representative initiative has been highly successful as it enables parents to ask questions or voice concerns to another parent, rather than the school administration.

The school has integrated a parent forum, where parents and parent representatives can discuss and learn about school issues, with the Parents and Citizens Association (P & C). Although this school has chosen not to have a school council, it has a strong consultative relationship with the members of the P & C and the parents' forum.

Case Study

Context

Approximately 700 primary school students are enrolled at this school, which has been catering for students from year 1 to year 7 since 1979. In line with changes to education in Queensland, this school introduced a prep year in 2007 and boasts new facilities for students in their first year of compulsory education. There are no school zones around the area in which this school is located. Unlike schools in or around Brisbane, this school is free to enrol students regardless of their residential address. This school has traditionally served a community with a lower to middle class socioeconomic status. In addition to the mainstream primary school there are 28 students in the school with diagnosed disabilities who are educated full-time in the special needs education unit on the school campus. A further 80 students have learning difficulties and work with individualised learning programs and are supported by the special needs unit and the learning support team. Over

70 teaching staff are employed by the school and are supported by a large number of volunteers within the classrooms. The current principal has been at the school for approximately four years. One of her primary objectives in this role has been to enhance community support for the school. The processes used by this school to enhance parental engagement encompass a range of categories described in Epstein's (1995) framework, including parenting, volunteering, decision-making, collaborating with the community and communication.

Communication

The school employs both formal and informal communication strategies to involve parents in their children's education. A new reporting system has been implemented this term (term 2, 2007) which provides students with a grade for their academic achievement on an A to E scale and ratings for their effort and behaviour in the classroom. Members of the school staff held an information evening for parents in order to explain the new reporting system, which is a common practice with any changes to school policies and processes. Parents who participated in a focus group for this study stated that they were extremely pleased with this information and new system of reporting as it acknowledged the aptitudes of individual students and provided more holistic information about their child in the classroom. As with most schools, this school offers parent-teacher interviews each semester. This school, however, holds most of these interviews before and after school over a period of three weeks to assist as many parents as possible in attending face-to-face meetings with their child's teacher.

Other formal communication structures used by the school include a newsletter detailing school activities, which is produced each week with the support of the local shopping centre. The assistance of local businesses enables the school to provide the school community, community groups and local members of parliament with comprehensive information about school activities. Teachers are also encouraged to maintain contact with the parents of their students, particularly where students are facing difficulties in the class, and are provided with parents' telephone numbers and email addresses. Teachers also share information with parents about what they are doing in their classroom by placing notices on their classroom door, sharing this information with their parent representative or presenting information in the newsletter.

Volunteering

The administration of the school reported their belief that it is important to keep the school and wider community informed of school activities. Parents are invited to see students work in some form each term, through their written work, or by attending presentations and performances at the school. Once a semester, the school holds a range of student 'expo' evenings that families can attend to view the students' work. These exhibitions of students work are held at different times for each grade level to assist parents, who may have more than one child at the school, in viewing each of their children's school work. These evenings attract large numbers of visitors to the school,

with the principal suggesting that almost every student has at least one representative of their family attending the evening.

Another initiative to enhance parental engagement, which is in its third year at this school, is the use of parent volunteers to act as parent representatives for each class in the school. Parent representatives work with the classroom teacher and function as a point of contact for other parents with children in the class. These representatives assist with fundraising and facilitate ongoing contact between parents and the school. Parent representatives report to a forum, which has been integrated with the schools' Parents and Citizens Association in 2007. Parents reported that this initiative has been highly successful as it assists parents' communication with the school. The parent representatives enable parents to voice their concerns or make suggestions without having to meet directly with school administration. The principal indicated that these volunteers offer significant support to classroom teachers and create links with parents who may feel uncomfortable about discussing issues with school staff. Parents further reported that the parent representative helped create a network of parents with children in the class.

The integration of the parent forum and the Parents and Citizens Association (P & C) has resulted in greater numbers of members who regularly attend and are active within the group. The role of the P & C at this school is slightly different from the role that these associations may take in many other institutions. Members of the P & C are active in fundraising for the school, supporting the school by lobbying for new facilities and managing the school canteen and a highly successful Outside School Hours care program. This P & C, however, is also consulted on all variations in the school routine, such as staffing, budgeting and initiatives like creating new uniforms for students. The entire school leadership team attends the monthly P & C meetings including the registrar, who provides parents with information on the school budget and financial commitments. Parents report that this type of transparency in the P & C meetings promotes trust in the school administration and shows parents that their opinions are valued. In addition, the principal indicates that, as a result of the shared decision-making processes, parent representatives and members of the P & C are great advocates for any changes made within the school.

The leadership team's presence in these P & C meetings means that parent representatives and other members are able to raise concerns or offer suggestions and receive prompt feedback on or explanations for changes within the school. Parent representatives are then able to disseminate relevant information to other parents in the school community. Members stated that the prompt feedback and decision-making processes that take place in the P & C meetings mean that they are able to see results of their participation in a short time-frame. For example, one parent who participated in this study has a child with learning difficulties. She approached the P & C to find out about what support networks were available within the school for these parents. At this time the school did not offer any formal support structures for these parents, despite the support offered to students through the special needs and learning support units. This parent was, therefore, encouraged and supported in establishing a support network for parents whose

children have special educational needs. In a period of around three years, this group has become a vital source of support and information for all parents whose children attend learning support and the special needs unit and has given these parents an official representation on the P & C. These types of prompt results ensure that members feel that their actions in the P & C are making a difference and act as a great motivator for them to continue their participation in this area of the school's governance.

The P & C is very active in arranging volunteers to support the school. Members have chosen to form committees and sub-committees to address particular areas of activity. The Event Coordination committee, for example, has been divided into sub-committees which are responsible for individual fundraising events, like the various stalls held within the school and the school fete. Both parents and the school administration indicated that the amount of time that members had is the greatest challenge to overcome in order to get people actively involved in the school community. Parents report that the organisation of these committees has resulted in a larger number of volunteers being active in the school as there are a range of smaller roles that do not require an extensive time commitment. Those parents who are most actively involved in the school tend to have more time available for these commitments. A number of parents also arrange their working hours and the care of non-school-aged children in order to volunteer whenever possible. The use of email discussion groups between members of the P & C further assists members in exchanging information about the school between meetings without requiring a specific time commitment from any individual.

A large number of parents in this school are involved in activities in the classroom, which may include covering books for the library, assisting teachers with organising materials for a class or listening to children's reading or spelling. Over half of the eight parents, who participated in this study, reported that they actively volunteer within the school in addition to their P & C or parent representative roles. The volunteers in the school, however, are not restricted to members of the parent community and come from throughout the local community. The school is currently conducting a survey, distributed within the weekly Newsletter, to determine the numbers of volunteers and areas in which they assist the school. One reason for this survey is to ask parent who do not currently volunteer within the school to report areas and activities in which they would be interested in participating. The P & C President, the school's 'Adopt a Cop', regularly volunteers to read to students in the prep class. The school has established an induction program for new volunteers to ensure that each person understands their role and informs them of health and safety issues.

Collaborating with the Community

The feeling of a community is promoted by the school's leadership team who encourage the staff to enrol their own children at the school and to be actively involved in the wider community. In addition to the school's affiliation with the local shopping centre, the school has strong ties with the local police service through the 'Adopt a Cop' program. As noted previously, the schools 'adopted' police officer is active on the P & C and visits all classes to assist with education around behaviour support, protective behaviours and

local community issues. He is a frequent visitor to the school weekly assemblies. He also regularly speaks to students, parents and school staff about safety issues. His involvement is reported to promote better communication between the police service and the wider community and, importantly, to enhance the students' safety. More generally, student safety was reported as an indirect benefit of parental and community involvement as students know the parents who are involved in the school and are able to approach them when they need help, both within and outside of school hours.

Costs and Benefits

Parents reported that being active on the school site has a number of benefits for the school the students and for parents. The parents who are involved within the school reported that their participation is indicative of strong attitudes and beliefs about their children's education. They stated that by volunteering at the school, they are able to observe their child's behaviour and activities within the classroom. Parents stressed that communication both at home and between parents and the school is more effective if parents know their children's teachers, peers and the type of work they are doing in the classroom. When they volunteer to work with other students in the classroom, parents reported that they have a better understanding of their child's progress and the level of achievement that is expected of children in that age range.

Barriers and Gateways

The parents who participated in this study proposed a number of reasons for their continuing involvement in the school. In addition to being able to monitor and better understand their child's progress in the school environment, volunteering at school offers parents a social network and strengthens the social capital of the school community. All of these parents stated that they have fun when participating in school activities. One parent wrote in the school newsletter that her volunteering gives her 'a great chance to get to know other Mums and share a giggle'. The social aspects of volunteering in schools encourages many parents to participate, particularly those parents who are new to the area and do not have another support network. In their focus group, parents indicated that the social interaction between parents and with school staff and the wider community establishes a welcoming atmosphere. Parents reported that this friendly atmosphere motivates them to become more involved and promote the school within the community. In turn, the school has an increasingly good reputation around the Sunshine Coast which is evidenced by their increasing enrolment levels. Parents also feel that their involvement and the community-minded atmosphere of the school create a safe environment for all students.

The main reason given by parents, students and school administration for the level of parent engagement in this school is the mutually-supportive, friendly atmosphere of the school. Although an atmosphere is difficult to create or define, the administration has worked hard to establish a welcoming environment. All prospective students and parents are given a tour of the school by either the principal or the deputy principal. New parents and students are able to immediately meet other parents through the volunteer-run

uniform shop and the parent representative of their child's class. In line with the school's values, students and parents are encouraged to 'care for the school' and 'care for each other'.

Section 6.5 School 4

Summary

This case study outlines the parental engagement practices of a large secondary school in a rapidly growing area around 50 kilometres from the centre of Brisbane. This school offers a number of innovative programs, which attract students from outside the catchment area.

The current principal places a great deal of emphasis on establishing strong home-school relationships. He stated that he encourages all staff to maintain friendly relationships with parents to assist them in feeling welcome in the school. Parents and staff reported that his open and friendly demeanour contributes to the positive school atmosphere.

The parent liaison officer, employed by the school, is responsible for assisting new parents, organizing volunteers and arranging monthly parent morning teas, where parents can meet with each other and speak with the principal in an informal atmosphere. Parents reported that other members of the school community are often invited to discuss aspects of the educational programs.

Another initiative implemented by the school is the use of house group teachers and year level co-ordinators who are involved with the same group of students throughout their time at the school. All members of the school community who participated in this study reported that this initiative assists in creating strong relationships between teachers, students and parents. Many parents indicated that the informal communication with teachers, year level co-ordinators and house group teachers are more effective than report cards and parent-teacher interviews at keeping them informed about their child's progress.

This school maintains a school council, consisting of parent, staff and student representatives. Parent representatives expressed satisfaction that their involvement and feedback in the decision-making processes was welcomed by the school.

Case Study

Context

This secondary school is the longest established school in the region, which is situated in a rapidly growing area around 50 km from Brisbane CBD. The school currently has around 1 300 students, 46 per cent of whom reside outside of the catchment area. The principal explained that the reason for the large number of enrolments outside their designated zone is the range of programs offered within the school. In addition to the

mainstream high school program, the school offers an agricultural program, a certificate in civil construction, and Learn IT, a laptop-based learning program. Furthermore, the school offers specialised programs in a range of sports and a substantial Special Education Unit for children with disabilities such as Intellectual Impairment, Autistic Spectrum Disorders and Hearing Impairment. The school serves a relatively transient population, with a majority of students coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has a number of students who come from single-parent families or do not live with their parents. Many students' caregivers work in full-time employment. In addition, there are limited employment opportunities in the area and many of these parents and guardians travel to Brisbane for work, which places additional strain on the time available for them to participate in school activities.

Communication

When starting at the school 10 years ago, the current principal placed a great deal of emphasis on enhancing home-school relationships. He describes his style of leadership as drawing on the strength of relationships between members of the school community to enhance the management of the school. He actively encourages school staff to maintain friendly communications with parents and to help them feel welcome as members of the school community. Prospective students and their parents are given a tour of the school with the parent liaison officer and attend an interview with the principal or a deputy principal. At these interviews, the parents and students are informed of the school's programs, standards and disciplinary procedures. The parents at the school are invited to become active in the school and encouraged to maintain open lines of communication with the school staff. Parents who were involved in the focus group discussion for this study indicated that they feel this early contact with the school makes them feel valued and welcome in the school environment. They reported that the open and friendly demeanour of the school's leader filters down through all staff. The attitude of the front office staff is described by both the principal and parents as vital to the home-school relationship, as they tend to be one of the first and most frequent points of contact with the school. The school administration also has implemented a range of other processes to enhance communication with parents.

The parent liaison officer is a member of staff who has been employed to facilitate communication between teachers and parents. Although it was not a condition of her employment, the parent liaison also has children who attend the school. She reported that this dual role assists her in getting to know other members of the school community and relating to them as a parent as well as an employee of the school. The parents who participated in this study indicated that the parent liaison officer role has greatly enhanced home-school communication. In addition to providing tours of school facilities to prospective parents, the parent liaison officer is active in organising parent volunteers and activities, such as arranging billeted accommodation for visiting students. The school's parent liaison officer also organises a monthly morning tea for parents to socialise and interact with staff at the school. The principal tries to attend each of these meetings and offers parents an open forum to ask questions about any aspect of the school. Heads of Department are invited to give presentations to the parents who attend

and to discuss with parents how they can help their children in the particular subject areas. Approximately 12 to 20 parents attend these morning teas each month and reported that they appreciate the informal atmosphere and the information that is provided about the school. Parents indicated that these morning teas assist them in understanding the new methods of teaching and learning, which they may otherwise find daunting. They also know that they can contact the parent liaison officer if they require further information.

Another program used by the school to facilitate communication is the ‘house-group’, or pastoral care teachers, and year-level coordinators roles. These staff members are the first point of contact for many parents when they want to discuss their children’s academic life or any other aspects of their child’s school program. One male and one female teacher are given the role of coordinator for each year level. As much as possible, the ‘house-group’ teachers and year level coordinators work with the same cohort of students throughout their time at the school. The house-group teachers and year level coordinators are very involved in the school activities of their cohort, even attending their school camps. This practice is positively described by students, parents and staff alike as it promotes better relationships between members of the school community. The progression of coordinators and house-group teachers was implemented around six years ago. The senior students in 2006 were the first students to have had the same year-level coordinators throughout their enrolment in this secondary school.

The students, staff and parents who participated in this study indicate that the continuity of year level coordinators and house-group teachers creates trusting relationships between all members of the school community. Parents reported that students form a strong rapport with their house-group teachers and year level coordinators. In turn, these relationships enhance home-school communication so that parents and all members of the school community can share information, which can assist both parents and teachers when students are experiencing difficulties either at home or at school. The house-group teachers are not primarily responsible for disciplining students. This responsibility falls to the heads of department and the deputy principals, who have well-defined guidelines for the disciplinary responses to various actions. These disciplinary responses are explained to every enrolling student in their interviews with either the principal or deputy principals. The well-defined boundaries and disciplinary actions have resulted in reduced behavioural problems at the school. Students who participate in the school’s specific programs, such as the ‘Learn IT’ laptop program, the sports academy or the agricultural sciences program are aware that if they have any reports of problems in their behaviour they may risk losing their place in the program.

All participants in this case study reported that the strength of the community enhanced parental involvement in this school. The school has around 150 staff members and receives high ratings on staff satisfaction surveys. Parents reported the high levels of staff satisfaction and dedication to their students’ education compels them to be more involved themselves. Many staff members have children who attend the school and some of the current staff and parents attended the school as students themselves. Former students identify themselves as being very loyal to the school. Furthermore, those who have been members of the school community for extended periods of time tend to know one

another, which can assist with informal levels of communication. All members of the school community, however, reported that there are high levels of rapport between parents, students and teachers, who often communicate outside of school hours. These open and informal channels of communication have been described as the greatest method of enhancing both parental and student engagement, as they assist in making all members of the school community feel valued and respected. Participants in this study also suggested that these informal relationships make the school a welcoming environment. When explaining his focus on the development of strong relationships in the school community, the principal stated that ‘happy parents are the best advocates for the school’.

The school offers parents a range of opportunities to gather information about their child’s schooling. The school offers formal modes of communication, such as parenting programs run through the school chaplaincy, student reports which are issued each term and a monthly newsletter. Parents and staff, however, reported concerns that they do not always receive the newsletter when students are asked to take them home. In addition, parents are invited to attend an information evening at the beginning of every school year. These meetings are held for parents of students who are entering upper secondary school and for those who are entering high school. The school runs a disco for grade 8 students to assist parents in attending the evening without needing to find alternative arrangements for their child. These meetings provide parents an opportunity to discuss their child’s subject selections and the expectations for student achievement and behaviour throughout the year. The school also arranges parent-teacher interviews each semester.

Parents reported that the parent-teacher interviews are helpful, yet less effective than the informal communication that they have with the staff throughout the year as the time is limited and parents need to speak with a range of teachers. They indicated that the contact they have with their child’s house-group teacher, who calls each parent at least once a term, is more effective in finding out how their child is progressing at school. Parents are also notified by mail if their child is experiencing difficulties or performing well in school. There is a great deal of support for the letters sent home to notify parents that their child is performing well or has made marked improvements. The recognition of their child’s efforts encourages greater levels of home-school communication by showing parents that negative student outcomes do not have to be the sole focus of discussions. Parents report that this letter positively reinforces changes, when students are making an effort to improve their academic achievements or behaviour in the classroom and may motivate them to continue. The school also holds a number of ‘A level’ excursions and school activities, in which only students with consistently good behaviour and/or academic achievement can participate.

Volunteering

Parents and staff acknowledge that it is often the same group of parents who volunteer in both primary and secondary schools. Many of the eight parents, who participated in this study, knew each other previously from their involvement at their children’s primary

school. All of the parents in this focus group had participated in the Parents and Citizens Associations (P & C) at both the local primary school and this high school. This P & C manages the school canteen and a few fundraising events for the school. They state that it is important to recognise that the community is relatively small with a low socioeconomic status. The P & C do not want, therefore, to alienate or place financial pressure on any members of the community by high levels of fundraising. The limited number of fundraising activities, however, means that there are fewer roles in which parents may volunteer. Nonetheless, the members of the P & C are quite active in making suggestions for changes in the school. These members indicated that they have high levels of loyalty and trust in the principal. They reported that all of their ideas receive prompt feedback and many are implemented within the school. Parents stated that by seeing these changes in the school, they feel valued, recognised and are more willing to continue their involvement in the P & C.

Parenting and Learning at Home

The majority of parents and students who participated in this study reported that they feel the most effective types of parental involvement include activities like offering their child encouragement and emotional support. These activities are generally included in the 'parenting' category of Epstein's framework. Other assistance like providing children assistance with their organisation and access to resources, which may be described as 'learning at home', were also noted to be extremely effective and the greatest sources of assistance for secondary students.

Decision-Making

Although they have been dissolved in many schools throughout Queensland, this school has chosen to maintain a school council. The school council includes four elected representatives from the school staff and the P & C, two elected representatives from the upper secondary student body and the principal. The P & C and staff representatives are elected by their peers to serve on the school council for a two-year term with a limitation of three terms for any of these members. Each year a student from year 11 is elected as a student representative for a term of two years. This organisation means that there are always two student representatives on the council, a junior representative from grade 11 and a senior representative from grade 12. The school council regularly meets, over a meal provided by the school, to discuss strategic planning, school policies and the budget. Representatives indicated that sharing a meal before the council meetings assists all members to relax and communicate at an equal level.

Barriers and Gateways

As with other schools included in these case studies, the parents, staff and students at this school reported that parental engagement in high schools is markedly different to that in primary schools. Students indicated that they do not really want their parents to be involved in activities at the school site. Parents, in turn, reported wanting to give their child a greater sense of responsibility and independence when they reach secondary and

senior secondary school. Parents also suggested a range of other factors that act as barriers to their participation in the school, such as the limitations that full-time employment places on their time especially if their work is carried out in Brisbane. While the parent information evenings and morning teas may help in overcoming one challenge, many parents reported feeling daunted by the school work that their child is given as the content and types of assignments are often different to the work they were required to do in secondary school.

Section 6.6 School 5

Summary

This case study examines parental engagement processes in a provincial special school for students with a range of needs which range from mild intellectual to multiple severe physical and intellectual disabilities. Members of the school community reported that effective home-school communication is extremely important to assisting students with special needs, both at school and at home.

One initiative by the school to facilitate effective home-school communication is a daily communication book for most students in which teachers and parents record information about the students' behaviour, achievements and needs. These books provide a comprehensive record of the student's progress that can be viewed by parents, teachers or members of support staff. Each student at the school has an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which is collaboratively designed every six months by the student's parents, teachers and support staff. The school newsletter is also considered highly important as a form of information about events and activities at the school. The weekly newsletters are provided to all members of the school community and are made available on the website to prospective parents and interested member of the public.

The school has a large number of volunteers, who regularly work with students and assist with other school activities. A Parents and Citizens Association is also active in providing information and a support network for the school and parents. Parents and other volunteers are reported to form strong relationships with the school and the teachers. The principal reported that the high level of stability of staff in the school has assisted in the creation of these strong staff-parent relationships and in the level of parental engagement with the school.

This school is reported to have has strong links with individuals and organisations in the local community who support the school through fundraising activities, providing their expertise or assisting with the educational needs of students.

Case Study

Context

This special school was established in 1986 and has had the same principal for approximately 15 years. At the time of the case study the school had an enrolment of 66 students aged between 6 and 19 years, ranging from students with mild intellectual disabilities to students with multiple severe physical and intellectual disabilities. In order to cater for the individual needs of every child, class sizes are limited to approximately six or seven students. The school employs 11 teachers, 11 teacher aides, a full-time school nurse, a school leader and head of curriculum. The services of physiotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and other specialist staff are also involved in school programs. Every class is run by a teacher and at least one teacher aide and a volunteer. The school tries to maintain a one-to-one ratio between students and teachers, teacher aides or volunteers in classes of students with multiple severe disabilities, to assist all students in participating in classroom activities. This is particularly important in the physical therapy programs that take place in the school spa, where all students require constant monitoring.

Parents of students at this school reported high levels of satisfaction with the school and school programs. The school consistently receives the highest ratings on the parent opinion scales throughout the area. Parent involvement in the school is welcomed and encouraged by the school. The school encourages parents and family members to visit the classrooms and become involved in school programs. Each day the school has around four or five parent volunteers, who assist in community access programs and in the classroom, helping students with various programs.

Communication

Staff at this school reported that monitoring the medical issues and behavioural patterns of each student with special needs requires extensive and effective home-school communication. As such, parents and school staff must form a partnership in order to support the needs and learning outcomes of each child. Furthermore, the school administration recognises the need for parents of students with special needs, particularly parents of children with multiple severe physical and mental disabilities, to have a break from their role as care-givers. Almost all students participate in their annual class camp, which is the one school event each year that parent volunteers do not generally attend. In addition to exposing students to new environments and activities, these overnight camps are one way in which the school offers respite for parents. These activities draw attention to the high levels of trust between parents and school staff. The school is very supportive of all forms of parental involvement and provides parents with the support that they need in a specialised environment to care for all students. Around 70 per cent of the parent community are engaged in day-to-day school activities. All parents, however, are involved in the development of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for their child.

In acknowledgement of the range of abilities and needs of students, the IEPs for most students are developed and reviewed six monthly. These IEPs are collaboratively produced and based on the individual student's needs, as perceived by their parents, the teaching staff, speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist and the school nurse. The parents' knowledge base of their child is highly valued in this process, with members of the school expressing the opinion that parents are the 'experts' in the abilities and needs of their child. Parents, teaching staff and specialist staff meet twice a year to establish educational goals for the student. These IEPs include individual behavioural, occupational and language goals for each student. Every student's IEP also includes literacy and numeracy goals, although these differ for the individual. For students with higher levels of disability, literacy goals may involve achieving basic communication strategies. Cooking courses are frequently used in the school to enhance the students' practical literacy and numeracy skills. The literacy goals for students with higher levels of ability can include work from all key learning areas in the Queensland curriculum other than Languages Other Than English (LOTE), which is not offered in the school.

The school employs a number of communication strategies to keep parents informed of their child's progress with their learning goals. Teachers have frequent informal communication with parents who volunteer at the school site. If this is not possible, however, the school maintains a daily communication book for most students. Almost every day teachers record information about each student's behaviour, the activities in their class and the student's progress with the goals outlined in their IEP. Parents are also able to record information about any medical problems their child is experiencing and their behaviour and activities at home. Parents, teachers and the school administration indicated that this book is essential to effective home-school communication for this school. Parents and teachers are able to view and write in the daily communication book when they have available time, which overcomes one of the major barriers to parental involvement. Furthermore, this book provides a comprehensive record for parents, teachers and the school administration of the student's progress in school and any many difficulties that they may be experiencing.

The weekly school newsletter also provides effective communication between the school and the school community. Every class provides information for the newsletter about the activities that they have been involved in during the week. The newsletter also often includes photographs of student's activities, including the annual camps for each class. Parents reported that this newsletter is important in informing and involving them in school activities. One parent of a previous student stated that her interest and involvement in the school has been maintained by the school sending her out copies of the weekly newsletter. Another form of information for current, previous and potential parents of the students at the school is the school website. This website, which offers up-to-date information on the school's facilities, activities and programs, is often the first point of contact for the families of prospective students. The school frequently receives enquiries about enrolments from parents of students who are currently at schools elsewhere in Queensland, interstate and even overseas.

In addition to the high levels of parent satisfaction and enquiries about enrolments, the school principal reported that this school has outstanding staff retention and satisfaction data. The teachers at this school are highly dedicated to their students and given high levels of autonomy. Each year, all school staff spend a significant amount of time planning the classroom organisation for each child, based on their individual needs and abilities. Often teachers have the same cohort of students for a number of years. When speaking with the teaching staff, one teacher reported that the majority of her current class had been taught by her for around three years. The consistency of teaching staff is promoted by the school and is seen to benefit staff-student and staff-parent relationships. In addition to the annual planning meetings and the daily communication book, teaching staff provide parents with semester reports on the progress their child is making towards achieving their IEP goals. At the end of the year, the school provides parents with a general report, which focuses on the positive achievements that their child has made during the year. Teachers are also responsible for organising the volunteers in their classroom. The school has also assisted parents and former students in gaining employment in the school. One parent, who regularly volunteered within her child's classroom, has been supported by the school in her training to become a teacher's aide and progress to a career in education. The school is currently supporting a former student to access similar training.

Volunteering

A small but active group of parents participate in the Parents and Citizens Association (P & C) at the school. The P & C at this school is not heavily involved in fundraising activities, aside from an annual raffle and pie drive. Any funds raised by the P & C are put directly towards the cost of insurance for parents who volunteer in school programs. The principal reports that the primary reason for not engaging the P & C in a number of fundraising activities is that a number of the parent community comes from a lower socioeconomic background and face considerable expenses for the medical care and equipment their child requires. The principal describes the P & C of this school as functioning in a similar way to a school council. Members of the P & C are consulted on all new policies and programs that are implemented and any issues that the school may be facing. When parents raise issues about the school with the principal, they are often encouraged to present their case at the monthly P & C meetings. In this way, parents and other members of the P & C are invited to discuss and participate in solving the issues faced by the school. Members of the P & C report that the high level of consultation makes them feel that they are active and valued members of the school community.

The P & C provides members of the school community with a support network and forum for parents to share information about the difficulties associated with having a child with a disability. Members of the P & C and parent community often offer to share their knowledge and skills with other parents. A parent of a former student at the school is still involved in the P & C and provides a wealth of information to both the school staff and the parent community on the support services and resources available for children and young people with disabilities. School staff report that this area has a fairly transient population and that, as a result, many parents do not have the support network of their

extended family. The school and members of the P & C, therefore, provide parents with information on respite care and other support services outside the school, including how to fill out paperwork regarding their child's disability and access to all types of financial assistance that are available to students and former students of the school. One tragic aspect of contact with students with severe physical disabilities is that occasionally the school community must manage the death of a student. One member of the P & C, a grandparent of a student, is formally trained and offers her services as a grief counsellor to members of the school community when a student or former student of the school passes away. The principal reported that the strength of the community network, between parents, students and staff, is highlighted during times of difficulty and grief.

Collaborating with the Community

The strength of the community networks is highlighted by the school's positive relationships with other organisations. This school has a relationship with the local TAFE and students are able to access courses, like Hospitality and basic information technology. The school is a Registered Training Organisation and offers Certificate I in Work Readiness, which teaches students interview skills and to write resumes. Parents are often involved in community access programs, through which students are taken into the town centre to learn practical skills such as shopping, using the postal service, banking, recreation and sporting facilities.

The school also offers a number of programs to assist parents in managing their child's disability. One recently implemented and highly successful program to assist parents was derived from parents' communication of the difficulties that they faced in taking their child to regular paediatric appointments. Children with severe physical and mental disabilities are required to maintain contact with a paediatrician to monitor their medical needs. Parents were then required to report the results of these consultations to the school nurse, who would ensure that all other members of staff were informed. The visits to the local hospital with their child and reporting detailed medical information created difficulties for a number of parents, who needed to monitor their child's behaviour and remember medical jargon. Acting on these reports of difficulties, the school nurse organised for one of the local paediatricians to visit the school for their regular consultations with students. Parents, the school nurse therapists and the child's teacher are also present during these consultations, which reduces the burden on parents to convey medical information to members of the school staff. Teachers reported that the paediatricians appear to be more comfortable in conveying this knowledge directly to parents and school staff themselves and are more relaxed in the school environment than they are in the hospital, where they have other demands on their time. This initiative has been so successful that a paediatrician who treats other students has started holding consultations at the school site. In addition to this initiative, parents are often invited to attend presentations on methods of managing various forms of disabilities by specialist speakers.

Collaborating with the Community

Although not specifically part of the parent engagement in the school, this school has a number of links with the wider community. Where appropriate, students may be assisted with participating in programs at a local primary school or TAFE. Members of the local community also assist the school in providing work experience placements to assist students in reaching the occupational goals in their IEP. A recent initiative, organised by a teacher and facilitated by parents and local businesses has raised around \$12 000 for the school to purchase a powered standing frame for students with physical disabilities. The equipment used by the school to assist students with physical disabilities is often very expensive and, during the school holiday periods, parents are offered the opportunity to borrow some of the equipment to support families in assisting their child at home. In these ways, the school is highly supportive of parents and families while their child is attending the school, during holiday periods and continues its support of students once they have left the school.

Barriers and Gateways

One aspect of parental engagement that has been highlighted in the case studies of schools that have special needs units and at this special school is that a larger proportion of parents of students with special needs are involved with school activities than parents of students in mainstream school programs. Members of staff at this school, who have also taught in mainstream schools, acknowledged that there is a significant difference in the level of parental engagement and that the level of contact with parents of students at this school is significantly higher than the contact with parents of students in mainstream schooling.

Section 6.7 School 6

Summary

The parental engagement practices outlined in this case study are used in a rural secondary school, with around 400 students. 38 per cent of students enrolled in this school are from an Indigenous background.

Members of the school community, who participated in this case study, indicated that there are high levels of informal interaction between the teachers and parents at this school. Teachers reported that their participation in community activities, such as being involved in or supporting local sporting teams, assists them in establishing strong relationships with parents and facilitates effective communication.

This school employs an Indigenous community liaison officer, who is reported to play an important role in maintaining strong relationships between the school and Indigenous members of the school community. The principal and Indigenous community liaison officer regularly visit the local Indigenous community to meet with parents and has offered a range of meetings and presentations by school staff in the area. Members of the

school community also present a regular program on local radio to inform members of the community about school activities and events.

Members of the school community reported that this radio program has been a successful method of overcoming some of the barriers to home-school communication faced by the school. For example, school staff indicated that as some families in the school community do not have a telephone or internet access, it could be difficult for the school to convey information about school activities or any problems that their children may be having.

This school has strong relationships with organisations, businesses and individuals in the local community. A number of programs, such as the 'Young Mothers' are run in collaboration with other organisations to support the learning of all students and offer particular support to students at-risk.

Case Study

Context

This high school is around 250 kilometres north-west of Brisbane. Due to its proximity from a major city, this school is considered to be rural but very similar to remote schools. The school enrolls over 400 students from the local shires, who are predominantly from a rural background. 38 per cent of students are from an Indigenous background. It was established in 1945 and, as such, a number of staff and parents also attended the school as students. The school employs around 70 staff, including nearly 40 teachers, around 13 teacher aides and an Indigenous community liaison officer. The principal reported that despite the remote location, there are few problems associated with staffing the school due to the motivation and dedication of the staff as a whole.

Communication

A number of reports from parents, students and school staff demonstrate the importance of community links in this relatively remote region. Teachers noted that there is a significant level of unstructured, informal communication that takes place with parents and students outside school hours. Parents and teachers often have the opportunity for these types of interactions outside school hours or as a result of their participation in and support for local sports teams. Parents reported that they receive more information about how their child is progressing at school through this face-to-face interaction than they do through written communication with the school. They also noted that the parent-teacher interviews, which are held once a semester, do not provide them with enough time to receive information and ask questions about their child's progress in school. The teachers, who participated in the focus group for this study, noted that students seem to highly value the support provided by the staff when they participated in out-of-school activities, such as local sporting teams or in sporting events. They described their participation in local events and activities as one method for creating and maintaining relationships with members of the school community.

The relationships between the school and the parent community have been progressively built over a number of years. The principal noted that the previous principal had not been in the school for a long period of time and, thus, there was a degree of scepticism among the community that he too would only stay in this position for a short time. The principal reported that the building of trust and strong relationships with parents has been a consistent focus but that it initially took around 2 years to feel that he was accepted as a member of the community. He also indicated that it took him around three or four years to fully understand the cultural differences of the Indigenous community and to work effectively with Indigenous parents. During the first few years in the position, the Principal relied heavily on the school's Indigenous community liaison officer to introduce him to the cultural traditions of the school's Indigenous community members.

The role of the Indigenous community liaison officer is designed to facilitate communication between the school and Indigenous students and parents. This Indigenous community liaison officer is often the first and most frequent point of contact between the school and Indigenous parents and assists members of the Indigenous community with their involvement in school activities. Members of the school community noted that some Indigenous parents are not very comfortable coming to the school to attend meetings or speak with teachers. One parent, who participated in this study, revealed that she had a fairly negative experience as a student at this school. She reported that when she attended the school, she was one of only a few Indigenous students at a high school level and felt like an outsider in the predominantly non-Indigenous classrooms. Although at 38 per cent of the student population the number of Indigenous students at the school is significantly larger now than it was in the parents' generation, Indigenous students are still a minority in the school. Furthermore, the proportion of Indigenous students lessens in upper-secondary grades, as many students leave to pursue traineeships, apprenticeships or other pathways. The school, particularly through the community liaison officer, however, encourages both students and parents to be engaged in students' school education. The principal regularly goes to visit the local Indigenous community to meet with parents and has offered a range of meetings and presentations by school staff in the area, away from the school site. He reported that this initiative increased the level of Indigenous parents attending school meetings but did not involve the number of parents required to viably continue the program.

One method of communication that has been successfully established by the school is the use of radio. All schools in the region take turns in presenting a regional radio show. Five or six times a year, this school has the opportunity to promote school activities and student achievements on this regional radio program. In addition to this regional initiative, the school presents a segment on local radio every Monday morning. The principal indicated that in addition to informing members of the local community of school activities and events, this radio segment provides the school with a forum to promote positive student achievements and activities. He stated that a great deal of the communication between parents and the school revolves around negative aspects of their child's behaviour and progress. This radio segment, however, provides the school with a public forum in which to promote students' successes. The community liaison officer reported that this radio segment is a highly effective communication tool between the

school and Indigenous parents, who are regularly updated on school activities, programs and events.

Parents also regularly receive information about their child by mail. Each term, a student report outlining their progress and behaviour is mailed to parents. When a student is absent from school without explanation or if they do not submit a required homework assignment, letters are also sent home to parents.

The school works on a system of six 'levels' of behaviour, with all students starting on the first level at the beginning of each year. Various infractions of school rules can result in students being moved down one or more 'levels', which may lead to higher levels of discipline, including suspensions or expulsions. Students are also able to move down levels, when they demonstrate good behaviour in every class they attend throughout a one week period. Only students on levels one or two can participate in activities like school excursions or the annual camp. Parents are always sent home letters when their child's behaviour 'level' at school changes. As noted previously, the school recognises that many letters home, with the exception of school reports, are focused on negative aspects of the students' progress in school programs. To remedy this, the school has recently implemented a system of 'purple' merit slips that are received by students when they demonstrate high levels of achievement, improvement or good behaviour in the classroom. When students receive 5 of these 'purple' slips from at least 4 different teachers, they receive a bronze merit award and a letter is sent home to parents to inform them of their child's achievements.

Year coordinators undertake the role of providing parents with information about their students' behaviour, options for students within the school and, in the case of year coordinators at the upper-secondary levels, information about post-school pathways. The school also holds parent information evenings at the crucial 'transition' points in secondary schooling, including the transition into secondary at grade 8, and the transition into upper-secondary school between grades 10 and 11. At these evenings parents are provided with information about the subject options, the curriculum at this level and the requirements for students' work.

Parenting and Learning at Home

Parents in this school appear to be active in their support for their children's education. All parents and students noted that they regularly communicate about what is going on at school and how students' are progressing. Students reported that parents are supportive of their aspirations for post-school pathways and help them in furthering their interests in a number of ways, like paying for and driving them to extra-curricula activities and showing an interest in their sporting activities. The most important aspect of parental involvement reported by these students, however, was that their parents were always there to talk to when they were experiencing stress or difficulties with school.

Collaborating with the Community

The school also offers a variety of programs to assist students in conjunction with other organisations in the local community. Parents and members of the local community assist the school workplace coordinator in offering work experience placements, traineeships and school-based apprenticeships for students at the school. Parents are frequently involved in finding these placements for their own children. Other parents, who work in local industries, are active in employing students as trainees or apprenticeships. Together with the local Christian Brothers association, the school assists with the 'Annex', an initiative for students who have been disengaged in the schooling process over a long period of time. The 'Annex' employs Indigenous teacher aides to work up to 25 of these students at any given time. Staff at the Annex see parents daily and have a great deal of contact with the Indigenous parents. They offer a service to work with parents on an individual basis to assist their children and further their own education. The school also works in conjunction with the Community Training Centre (CTC) Youth Services to offer an educational program for pregnant students and young mothers aged between 15 and 17 years. The program currently enrolls around 10 young mothers who attend school one day per week. CTC and the school have established links with the local child-care centre which provides care for the children while their mothers are attending the program. There are plans to extend this program to two days a week to give these students more access to part-time education.

Barriers and Gateways

Members of the school staff report that they have experienced difficulties in providing ongoing communication with a number of parents. The school does not always have current telephone numbers for parents nor do parents always have access to Internet connections. The school, in conjunction with a local library, have provided computers with internet access for the community. There are a limited number of computers and not all parents can gain access to them when it is required. This means that communication via telephone or email are fraught with difficulties. As a result, a significant level of school communication is mailed to parents or conveyed by the students. The fact that the monthly school newsletter is sent home with students may also create a barrier to parents receiving information about the school. Parents noted that receiving the newsletter was dependent on the individual child. A number of parents reported that their children do not always bring the newsletter home or, on the occasions that they do, may leave it in their school bag or not give it to their parents. Families at the school, therefore, may not always receive the benefits of the information offered in these comprehensive newsletters.

On the other hand, members of the school community reported that the school's use of written communication can raise another barrier for parents. Parents with low levels of literacy, for example, may find it difficult to interpret all information sent to them about school activities, events and the subject choices that are offered to their child. Other parents indicated that they often found the educational jargon, used to describe school programs and curriculum difficult to understand. All parents who participated in this

study report that they find face-to-face communication with the school easier to understand. In response to this preference, the school tries to provide parents with points of contact, such as the year-level coordinators and the community liaison officer within the school to discuss any issues about their child's schooling.

As with all high schools described in these case studies, both parents and students reported that parents are less involved in their child's education at the secondary school level than they were when their child was in primary school. Students noted that many parents face barriers to their involvement, including significant travel to get to and from the school, a lack of time and a need to look after other siblings. The students who participated in this study indicated that their parents often do not understand the homework tasks and assignments that they are set. Parents reported feeling daunted by new methods of teaching and learning, which appear to be highly different from the ways that they were taught when they were in secondary school. Students indicated that occasionally when their parents attempt to assist them with school work can result in arguments about how things should be done. Students, therefore, reported being more comfortable asking their peers and former students at the school to help them in explaining problem areas in homework and assignments, before approaching their parents and teachers. The difficulties in understanding new teaching and learning methods and the resulting tension from trying to assist with homework may be a barrier to parents' involvement in students' 'learning at home'. Another barrier to parent involvement in the high school, described by both parents and students, is that students want more independence from their parents once they reach their adolescence. Students described having parents at school as 'embarrassing' and 'shame'. This suggests that parents, with respect for their child's wishes, may not feel comfortable being active within the school.

Section 6.8 School 7

Summary

This case study describes the parental engagement practices in a small P-10 school in a rural region of Queensland. The current principal has been at the school for approximately two and a half years and has adopted a community focus in the management of the school.

Approximately 50 students enrolled at this school are from Indigenous backgrounds. Members of the teaching staff reported that some of these students' families prefer not to be involved in activities at the school site. To overcome this barrier to engagement, the deputy principal and Indigenous teacher aides regularly visit Indigenous members of the school community away from the school.

This school has strong links to the local council and within the small local community. Parents and members of the school staff reported that the size of the community assists in establishing and maintaining strong home-school relationships and high levels of informal communication. Members of the school community also reported their view that

the difficulties that the school has in attracting and retaining teaching staff has a negative influence on parental engagement.

Parents who participated in this study indicated that there was a small but active group of parents who were involved in school activities. They suggested that one reason that more parents are not involved is a belief that their participation will require a significant commitment of their time and skills. Teachers and teacher aides, on the other hand, reported that many parents are involved in activities that they value and, particularly, activities that engage and excite their children.

The principal has chosen to maintain a school council to assist in the administration of this school. She reported her belief that, although some training was required to provide members with necessary skills, it is an important and valuable way to involve parents.

Case Study

Context

This school is located in a rural region around 250 kilometres of Brisbane. Established in 1973, the school currently enrolls approximately 270 students from prep to grade 10. Around 50 of the students come from an Indigenous background. The school employs 15 teaching staff, including classroom teachers for students in the primary years and subject teachers for students from grades 8 to 10. The region is predominantly rural with families coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents who participated in this study indicated that both parents are employed full-time, with at least one parent required to regularly travel significant distances for their work, in a high proportion of families in the area. This creates a significant barrier to the involvement of many parents in their children's education.

One issue that the school faces is that it only offers education to a grade 10 level. Students, who want to complete upper secondary school, therefore, are required to go to other schools, generally in towns in the region. There are a decreased number of enrolments in the secondary school levels of the school as many parents decide to move their child at the beginning of secondary school rather than them changing schools at the beginning of their upper secondary grades. Parents reported their concerns that the quality of secondary school teachers is waning and that their children may not always be gaining the preparation for upper-secondary that they require. Many students who are talented and achieve higher academic results are moved to secondary schools in the closest major town or further from home as parents believe that this will give them greater preparation and an advantage in upper secondary school.

The current principal has been at this P- 10 school for approximately 2 and a half years. She reported that she has spent much of this time building the trust of the school community and some stability within the school while gradually implementing new policies and program. One of her first initiatives was to implement the school's new motto and value statement, known as RAPP. This acronym represents four key statements

that are used throughout the school: Show **R**espect, Get **A**cademic, be **P**roud and **P**articipate to the Max! The motto has been used as part of a new behaviour management program, which rewards positive student behaviour. Parents reported that this program has been gradually implemented throughout the school and taken some time to gain staff confidence. Each month students who are recognised as showing high levels of positive behaviour, in line with the school motto, are eligible to receive RAPP awards at the school parade. The school ensures that parents of students who will receive these RAPP awards are contacted prior to the parade to give them an opportunity to come to the school and see their child receive an award. Students who demonstrate positive behaviour in day-to-day situations may also be awarded 'pink slips' by their teachers and other school staff, which are raffled for prizes each month at the school parade. Teachers reported that the implementation of the RAPP awards and pink slip program have been highly successful as they are visible rewards for positive student behaviour and that students of all levels are very proud to receive them. The parents who participated in the study supported the teachers' evaluations of the program and added that the success of the program can be attributed, at least in part to the staff's relationships with students and with each other.

Communication

The school employs a number of teacher aides, some of whom are active in supporting the school's relationship with Indigenous families in the school community. The principal reported that some parents of Indigenous students are not involved with activities at the school site and has approached her leadership of the school from a community perspective. For this reason, the deputy principal and Indigenous teacher aides visit individual families to maintain communication and their involvement with the school. Members of the Indigenous community are invited to attend meetings with teachers and occasionally guest speakers at a local centre. Around 9 Indigenous families and the school staff attended a meeting to hear a well-known former principal of a local school, speak about Indigenous education issues.

Volunteering

The members of staff, who assisted with this study, reported that there were a number of activities in the school in which parents are active. Each year the school holds a 'Spring Spectacular', a fundraising activity where teachers and parents work together. Every class in the school has a stall that they put together to sell items and raise money to assist the school. Parents and teachers are actively involved in their children's stalls, helping by donating or making items to sell or working at the stall on the day. Parents and the community are also involved in supporting the initiative, many parents and members of the wider community attend. It is the school's largest annual fundraiser organised by the Parents and Citizens Association (P & C).

Staff also indicated that parents value and are often highly involved in activities that engage their children and teach them practical skills. One example of this is the catering classes offered in secondary school which staff reported have been beneficial for parent

involvement. The school and catering students held one function attended by a significant number of parents, where the students devised, prepared and served a three-course meal. The reason provided for the parent engagement in this event is that students were highly engaged, had 'ownership' of the evening and were very proud of their accomplishments. Both teachers and parents suggested that when students are engaged and excited by activities at school, parents are more likely to become involved. Teachers reported that this can also be seen through the parental involvement with a range of sporting and other extra-curricular events, such as a robotics competition and Wakakirri, a National story-telling competition. The teacher in charge of organising the school's participation in Wakakirri described a high level of parental assistance with making costumes, props and assisting students with presenting this production. She noted that although there is only a small group of parents who are involved, they provide a great deal of assistance for students. Furthermore, many parents report that they spend a large portion of their weekend taking their children to sporting or other activities, which can be difficult when members of the family have to travel for work or work shifts.

The president and members of the P & C, however, reported that it has difficulty getting parents involved and the members believed that the level of parental participation in the P & C related generally to the parents' community spirit. Members, however, also stated that the time and skill levels required for many tasks were other factors governing parental involvement. Members suggested that some parents may fear that they would be given a task that was too time-consuming or beyond their skill set and therefore did not want to volunteer to assist in any P & C activities. The P & C's fundraising at this school raises resources for educational costs and facilities, not for extra-curricular or special facilities. The president of the P & C reported that they need to raise this money to support the school in having necessary facilities and basic equipment such as books and pencils, rather than assisting in upgrading facilities.

Decision-Making

In addition to the P & C this school also has a school council, which consists of 4 parents, a teacher, a teacher's aide, head of department, the school principal, and the Mayor and CEO of the local Council. The school has chosen to maintain a school council to assist while it is currently undergoing a triennial school review program. The principal reported, however, that there have been a number of challenges with the school council, including gaining commitment from all members and up-skilling the chairperson, through formal and informal training of management and school administration. The principal also stated that she has had some difficulty getting both parents and teachers involved in developing a strategic plan. She noted that there generally was a lack of understanding about the importance of confirming the school values and articulating its vision. Despite these problems, the principal still believes the school council is a successful and important initiative as it involves parents and enables them to share ownership of school decisions.

Collaborating with the Community

This school has a high level of social capital and significant support from the local community. The local council offers a great deal of support to the school, exemplified by the fact that both the local Mayor and the Council Chief Executive Officer participate in the school council. A significant number of staff, including the Principal, have children enrolled in the school and many of the current parent community, themselves were students the school. The small size of the school and local communities means that most members know each other well and have established relationships. Both teachers and parents reported that these relationships are beneficial in assisting effective home-school communication, particularly the informal and unstructured forms of communication.

Barriers and Gateways

One of the barriers to home-school communication that was reported by the school community was the difficulties that they have experienced in recruiting and retaining teaching staff. Over the previous year, the school has lost three staff members, two of whom are on leave, and have found it difficult to recruit appropriate replacements. The principal, staff and parents are concerned that the changes in staff can be disruptive for students and for home-school relationships. Due to the small size of the school, the principal reported that teaching staff are required to be very flexible in the subjects and extra-curricular classes that they feel comfortable teaching. The school tends to employ a number of graduate teachers who demonstrate this flexibility. While the principal and staff report being very happy with the graduate teachers that they employ, including the two who have been working at the school in 2007. Parents reported that new teachers can pose a barrier to home-school communication. They indicated that many of the graduate teachers who come to the school do not settle in the area for long periods and they do not, therefore, establish the same links with the community as other teachers.

Parents and staff indicated a number of other barriers to parental involvement at this school, including the focus of a significant amount of parent-teacher communication on students' negative behaviour. Teachers reported that they had little contact with some parents and tended only to communicate with them when their child was in trouble or having difficulties at school. Similarly, parents contacted the school when they believed there was a problem with their child's progress and/or behaviour. Parents and teachers reported that this barrier is slowly being overcome by the use of the pink slips and RAPP awards for positive behaviour. Members of the school community also reported that communication between teachers and parents is further inhibited by the number of parents who did not have telephones at home. Correspondence with some families, therefore, is restricted to the use of mail which can significantly slow the process of home-school communication.

Parents who participated in this study reported that some members of the school community feel that they do not have the skills to adequately assist the school or their child. One suggested reason for this is that some parents feel daunted by the work their child is doing due to changes in curriculum and teaching and learning practices since they

were at school. Other possible explanations that were offered included that many parents did not have a support network to assist them and they may not have the time to be active in school activities, particularly when they worked or had small children at home. Although the school can provide a support network, a number of parents choose not to or are unable to participate. Parents also suggested that a number of other members in the school community may hold the belief that education was the school's role and responsibility.

As this school has both primary and secondary students, it is well-placed to examine the difference in parental involvement at these levels of schooling. Parents and staff report that parents are far more involved in their child's education in the early years of schooling. The region holds an annual under-eights day, where all schools in the area get together to participate in activities with younger children in primary school. This is very well attended by parents, which supports parents' suggestion that there is more parental involvement in school and related activities when their children are younger. As they get older parental involvement tends to be more focussed on activities in the home. Although this is recognised as a general trend, parents and staff also report that the level of parental engagement is highly dependant on the students, parents and staff involved. Some teachers, even at secondary school levels, have high levels of success in creating greater levels of parental involvement.

Section 6.9 School 8

Summary

The school examined in this case study is a recently amalgamated P-12 College in a provincial area, which has been recognised for their program to assist families of Indigenous students in preparing them for school. Around 40 per cent of the students at this school are from Indigenous backgrounds. A majority of these students live in nearby communities in difficult housing situations.

This school employs an Indigenous home liaison officer, who considers issues of housing and education are closely linked and believes that parents of Indigenous children wish them to receive a good education but are not in a position to provide the necessary support. This Indigenous home liaison officer plays an important role in involving the Indigenous members of the school community and providing support for Indigenous students.

The schools program is described as being successful in engaging parent volunteers and supporting families to prepare Indigenous students for compulsory schooling. The school reported that some of the benefits of this program included a significant reduction in negative behaviour, increased attendance and school readiness among Indigenous students and an increase in the number of Indigenous staff employed at the school.

This school has chosen to maintain both a school council and a Parents and Citizens Association (P & C), which have well-defined roles in the schools. Members of the P &

C are active in raising funds for the school. Secondary students who participated in this study reported that they appreciate parents' involvement in school activities and often gain support from the parent community.

Case Study

Context

School 8 is a P-12 school in an historic village located about 30 km from the coastal city of Cairns. The college is situated on nearly 40 hectares of land which makes it one of the largest schools in Queensland as far as space is concerned. The college is surrounded by light forest and its distance from the nearest town means that it is not part of a community in the usual sense of that term. About 70 percent of approximately 400 students arrive by bus and about 20 percent by car, with the remaining 10 percent travelling on foot or by bicycle. Its location presents an immediate challenge when it comes to parental engagement and securing the involvement of the wider community. It is noteworthy that about 50 students from the surrounding area attend schools in a coastal town north of Cairns or in Cairns itself, with some of these being non-government schools. The most often-stated reason is the lack of program choice at this college, which is understandable given that in 2007 there are only 21 and 22 students in years 11 and 12, respectively.

Other features of its location and demography make the school of particular interest in the context of this study. Located in a tropic rainforest, the area has been home to Indigenous Australians for over 10,000 years. It was explored by Europeans in the early 19th century and it became the centre of flourishing gold and timber industries. The most significant aspect of parent engagement concerns the Indigenous community, and this is the centre-piece of this study. An excellent road from Cairns and tourist attractions have resulted in it becoming mainly a tourist centre and home to those seeking an alternative to a city lifestyle. Most of the village's commerce is tourist-oriented and many shops close soon after the last train departs for Cairns in mid-afternoon.

As is explained in subsequent pages, the college is particularly noteworthy for its outstanding award-winning program, the primary purpose of which is for staff to work in partnership with the families of Indigenous students to prepare them for school.

This school was established in 2007 with the amalgamation of the local high school, that had occupied the site for nine years, and the local primary school, that had been previously located for 114 years in the village itself. Empty buildings now stand on the former site. The re-located primary school opened in new premises beside the high school. While there are two campuses on the new site (P-6 and 7-12), the college is organised as three 'schools': junior, middle and senior, each with its own head.

As can be expected, it was a controversial decision to close the facility in the village and move it to a site several kilometres north which had no immediate community. Moreover, because the college was a new and much larger entity, a more senior level of appointment to the position of principal was required, and the appointee was not one of the existing

principals. He has had the challenging task of establishing the new college after the closure of the primary school on its former site and establishing himself as a leader in the school and its community. It was clear from the views of those who participated in interviews for the study that he is succeeding on both counts, and in particular, building the confidence in the college of the Indigenous community.

About 40 percent of approximately 400 students are Indigenous. Most live in four small communities in the area, with others (about 20 percent) travelling from the nearby town. Conditions in one of these communities are basic with no electricity and difficulty in securing a steady and stable supply of water. This community was once a mission settlement and much of its Indigenous community was relocated to the other communities after its closure. It seems there is some nostalgia for this community because most of its residents were employed and the community was relatively close-knit and supportive.

The level of difficulty is indicated by the housing situation. In one community about 150 people live in just 12 houses and young people often need to vacate their bedrooms as other adult members of the extended family move in. The Queensland Government agreed to provide more houses but only three have been built to date. The Indigenous home liaison officer considers the issues of housing and education are closely linked and believes that parents of Indigenous children wish them to receive a good education but are not in a position to provide the necessary support. While retention of Indigenous students to year 12 appears to be above the state average it is very difficult to hold them, with peer pressure to leave being strong and improving opportunities to gain employment in the markets in the local town. Some teachers appear to understand these circumstances very well but for others there is a need to gain a deeper understanding. The Indigenous home liaison officer described some developmental work on a history of the Indigenous peoples in the area before and after European settlement which will be a resource for both students and staff. Certificates to recognise progress of Indigenous students through the college are under consideration to provide early recognition of achievement before the final formal certificate at the end of secondary schooling.

The most significant aspect of parent engagement concerns members of the Indigenous community, but some general comments about the process at the college are offered at this point. Prior to amalgamation, parental engagement followed the pattern confirmed in research elsewhere around the country and internationally. It tended to be more evident in the primary school than in the secondary. In the former, a small number of parents volunteer their assistance in support of teachers in the classroom and serve in the tuck shop. Engagement is minimal at the secondary level. There have been no elections for community representatives for the college council. One might expect that parent engagement would decrease after the primary school was re-located from the town to the more isolated site of the college. The opposite appears to be the case with increased engagement of parents observed since the start of the 2007 school year. A view was expressed that bringing the primary school to the site might have a spill-over effect on the secondary school in the years ahead. In a broader sense it seems that bringing the two schools together has yielded particular benefits at the secondary level, with only 169 students in years 7-12 in 2007. A stronger sense of community and some benefits from

economy of scale are to be expected, in addition to the possibility of keeping parents involved as their children move through the different stages of schooling.

Communication

The college employs an Indigenous home liaison officer, who also has strong family and other links with the local Indigenous communities. He plays an important role in gaining the involvement of the Indigenous community and in providing support for Indigenous students. He mediates on occasions of student absence and organises meetings of the community at the college or about college matters. Another interviewee referred to the difficulty of his role. These often involve barbeques and refreshments. Several teachers and teacher aides have important links in one or more of these communities. The principal values their advice and assistance on a range of matters. The position of Community Education Counsellor (CEC) to assist in engaging the community has to date been school funded but it is believed that a CEC may soon be allocated to the school through a new program out of Central Office.

Volunteering

Discussions with two non-Indigenous parents illustrated the powerful parental engagement that exists at the primary level of this school. The parents reported that they assisted teachers in the classroom on a weekly or fortnightly basis and, in one instance, a parent became a member of the college council and thereby an important source of information for other parents. Both parents spoke of the benefits of interaction with students. The benefits of engagement flowed both ways in one instance, with the parent wishing to gain a deeper understanding of the college and to form a judgement as to whether it would be a good place for her pre-school age daughter on entry to the primary school. It was clear that this parent was prepared to exercise choice in the selection of a school for her daughter.

Parenting and Learning at Home

In addition to exercising choice over the school that their children attend, parents have opportunities to assist their children's education outside of the school environment. A special opportunity for the engagement of some parents arose when students from the college won a competition in robotics. Twelve students from grades 4 and 5 then travelled to Atlanta in the United States to participate in an international competition. Two teachers and five parents accompanied the group. There was a visit to Disneyland in California in addition to the event in Atlanta. There were particular benefits in cross-cultural learning because of the outstanding hospitality. The trip was supported through local fund-raising but parents were required to contribute about two-thirds of the costs.

Decision-Making

Governance arrangements are of interest to the examination of parental engagement in this school. There is a school council chaired by an Anglican priest. Other members of the council are three community representatives, three staff representatives, an

indigenous representative and two grade 12 student representatives. There is also a Parents and Citizens Association (P & C). School councils were an option but encouraged under a previous government, when it was expected that state schools would have substantial policy and budget powers along the lines adopted in Victoria. However, with a change in government, there are no plans to expand their role and they remain an option. With the establishment of this college it was an option not to have a council but arrangements were going well for the former high school and the new principal decided to have a council in the new entity. It is evident that the roles of council and P & C are relatively well defined and they do not get in each other's way. The council is concerned with strategic planning and direction setting; the P & C raises money and provides input into the development of facilities and community relations. Neither gets involved in the day to day college operations, which are recognised as being the exclusive concern of the principal and through him the staff.

The school council has brought benefits to the high school over the years. It encouraged the adoption of the Positive Learning Program that gives prominence to the 'universal expectations': 'I am SAFE. I am RESPECTFUL. I am a LEARNER'. It is evident from displays around the college and related professional development for teachers that these expectations are taken seriously.

The P & C developed a property plan and pressed for and supported the re-location of the primary school. It helped secure a grant of \$150,000 which will support the covering of space for college and community gatherings (the frequent rain makes this an important benefit). One interviewee reported debate on this issue, with some preferring the development of a sports field. Recognition of appropriate and sheltered social and community space won the day.

Collaborating with the Community

As indicated above, a noteworthy program at this school is now in its third year. This program has been recognised for its contribution to Indigenous education. The program is led by a teacher who has had extensive experience working with Indigenous students in northern Queensland and has a national profile for her contributions in this field. She is assisted by an Indigenous teacher aide. The program serves several purposes and is conducted through workshops and related activities in Indigenous communities – in homes, in meeting places and sometimes outdoors. Sixty workshops had been conducted by April 2007. This program arose from a review undertaken at the (former primary) school in 2005 of school curriculum, attendance rates and student behaviour. Consistent with state-wide initiatives such as Partner for Success, Destination 2010, and Halving the Gap targets, a range of consultation with the community resulted in a better understanding of learning needs. The program is a specific response to the needs of Indigenous students and their families and care-givers. The program was developed by a team of Indigenous community workers and non-Indigenous teachers.

Parents and others are engaged in activities designed to encourage young children to become ready for school. They work with their children to construct learning materials

and read books, and also create books. It is in one sense taking the college to the community. The project is a partnership of families and the college. Sometimes older children are involved in helping younger children in these activities. Other community agencies such as Community Health are also engaged from time to time. The program has special significance in the Indigenous community because it shares what some might see as 'secret stuff' about life and learning from which the community had previously been excluded. The intention is to help build a high level of trust and forge a powerful partnership.

An informative DVD of about 10 minutes duration describes and illustrates what has been accomplished by this program. The principal described the impact of the program in these terms: 'It's been a really successful program that's seen greater prep enrolments, improved school attendance and improved school readiness among Indigenous students'. These are significant educational outcomes.

The college recently applied for recognition in another round of awards. The application is also based on the school's program. It contains evidence of impact such as:

- Negative behaviour incidents have been reduced by 74 percent since 2004
- Attendance rate for Indigenous students has improved by 40 percent in 2007 over 2006
- School readiness among Indigenous students for year 1 and Prep was 100 percent in 2007
- An increase in the number of Indigenous staff employed at the school, rising from three in 2004, to five in 2005, to eight in 2006, to eleven in 2007 (an important change in the profile of staff given that 40 percent of student are Indigenous).

In addition to recognition through the national award, information about the program is being widely disseminated. The program team made a presentation at the conference of the Australian Council for Educational Research in September 2006 and will make a related presentation in New Zealand in early 2008. An international delegation from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has visited the college to learn more about the program which has also been adopted by other schools as a model of best practice.

The teacher responsible for the program acknowledges the importance of the 'cultural capital' in Indigenous families and the importance of intergenerational social and learning structures. It is evident that another more specific form of capital is being strengthened in the project, namely, social capital. Social capital of schools is generally considered to be the strength of mutually supporting relationships between the school and individuals, organisations, institutions and agencies in the community, including families. It is clear that the college is supporting parents and parents are supporting the college in the matter of preparing young people for school. In terms of the model for alignment described elsewhere in this report, it is also apparent that intellectual capital has also been strengthened, for parents and others in the Indigenous communities, and also for teachers, who are gaining knowledge and understanding of the circumstances of Indigenous

students. There is greater alignment of the college and its Indigenous communities with the focus being the wellbeing of students.

Barriers and Gateways

The participants in this case study reported a number of barriers and gateways to parental engagement in this school. One interviewee suggested that a number of staff do not have a deep understanding of the needs of children because they do not have children themselves. This was a general comment related to trends in society for couples to delay or abandon plans to have children. One parent interviewed expressed particular appreciation of the time that teachers gave to meeting with parents to report the progress of students. It seems that these meetings are organised to suit parents outside scheduled parent teacher evenings and as much as 40 minutes may be arranged.

Senior students reported their appreciation of having parents around the college in one capacity or another. There seemed to be less formality in students' interaction with parents on the college site. They noted the drop-off of parental engagement in secondary school but that, overall, there seemed to be an increase in engagement due to the growth of new sub-divisions and the consequent increase in school age children. One student interviewee was a member of college council and welcomed the opportunity to learn more about the college ('I learn about things before other students'). One is treated 'as an adult' in meetings.

Section 6.10 School 9

Summary

This case study outlines the policies and practices used to enhance parental engagement in a large P-12 College in a community at the high end of the socioeconomic continuum in Cairns. The college was formally established in 2007 and is essentially an expansion of the former local government primary school.

Despite the recent expansion of this college, the current principal and many of the staff have been retained from the former primary school. The stability of staffing has supported the strong sense of community in this school, which has an 'open door' policy to encourage parents and family members to visit the school at any time. All participants noted that the principal models this open door policy in all of his interactions with members of the school and wider community. Staff members reported that some beginning teachers are initially uncomfortable with the visible presence of parents and family members but after around a year they become more comfortable with the school's arrangements.

Student leaders reported that students at this school generally like parents to be engaged in school activities although, as noted in the case study, there may be some 'embarrassment' for secondary students to have their parents at the school site.

The Parents and Citizens Association (P & C) at this school is highly involved in providing support through fundraising and a range of other activities. The involvement of the P & C is exemplified by the school's part-time employment of an executive officer to assist with the administration of the P & C. The college also provides the P & C with the services of a minute secretary and a correspondence secretary.

Case Study

Context

This college is located in a rapidly growing suburb of Cairns, about 20 minutes by road from the CBD. The community is generally considered to be at the high end of the socioeconomic continuum. The socioeconomic profile explains the very high percentage of parents who pay the voluntary fees (about 95 percent). The college was formally established in 2007 and is essentially an expansion of the former local government primary school. The recently-completed middle school accommodating Years 7 and 8 is located on one side of the road. On the other side is the original school, which is itself relatively new, having been relocated from a much older site in the original historical settlement. Fifteen years ago the primary school had just two teachers and about 65 students and the growth is a reflection of new sub-divisions in what is effectively a dormitory suburb of Cairns.

The college motto is 'On the Tracks for Success' is an historical reference to the fact that the original primary school was located beside a railway, but it has also built this image into its curriculum. The college has identified four specialisations in areas such as the arts and the environment which is designated as 'tracks' and which it profiles in its prospectus and programs. Like every state school in Queensland, however, this school offers all key learning areas in the state-wide curriculum. There is a strand for each track at each year level. In a departure from general practice, the principal had a key role in the advertising for staff that bring special expertise in these four areas and his recommendations were accepted by the regional authority. There are sub-committees that assist in planning for each track, with parent and student representation in each instance. There is special priority for these tracks in funding arrangements.

The college is expected to grow very rapidly from its current enrolment of 969 students with projections of 1200 in 2008, 1400 in 2009 and 2000 in 2010. It will be a P-12 school in 2011. One of the administrative staff serves as a full-time enrolment officer for the college. The college draws widely, with about 300 of the current enrolment from other communities, including several who travel from Kuranda, about 30 minutes away by car. There are currently 38 indigenous students, two of whom are in foster care along with a small number of non-Indigenous students. Deputy principals make contact with caregivers and individual study programs are prepared for each student.

Communication

The principal of the college served previously as principal of the local primary school. The college will be re-classified as it continues to grow and, as is normally the case, he will need to apply for the re-classified post should he wish to continue as principal. He has been part of the expansion described above, planning for which has been protracted, since the community has pressed the case for a secondary school since 1994. Except for a short period in the early 1990s when there were several appointments of short duration, there have been only a few principals since the early 1930s when the original primary school was established. These long periods of service, exemplified currently in the incumbency of this principal, have meant close connections with and commitment to partnerships with the community. There has also been stability in staffing from the primary school and among a core group of parents who have provided support over the years. New and younger staff are joining the college as it expands. It seems that some of the newer staff are initially uncomfortable with the visible presence of parents, suggesting that what occurs at the college is more extensive than expected or is the norm in other schools. Parents, grandparents and other family members are free to visit at any time. Some senior staff were of the view that the discomfort of beginning teachers lasts only about 12 months after which they become acculturated.

The strong sense of community in the college and its forebears is challenged to some extent by the location of the two campuses, which are on what is currently the edge of the growth area. No doubt this will change as new estates are opened further up the valley from the current site. At present the relatively large numbers of students are bussed or driven to school. There are relatively large parking areas and 'kiss-and-drive' zones for those being dropped off. The two attendants at the crossing between the two campuses are kept very busy at arrival and departure times. The principal explained that this was a good time for him and other staff to have short conversations with parents. In general, despite 'ups and downs' over the years, it seems that the view that this is a 'community school, has been often passed by word of mouth, will ensure that a relatively high level of parent and community engagement continues.

The principal and several others who provided information for this study made frequent reference to the 'open door' policy of the college, illustrated above in the relative freedom of parents to visit the college at any time. It is clear that this is taken very seriously to the point that it is part of the culture at an early stage in the life of the new college. It is also clear that the principal models the policy in everything he does with students, staff, parents and the wider community. All who participated in interviews for this study acknowledged that his leadership was important in the matter of parent engagement. Professional leadership is critical to success in engaging parents at this college.

Volunteering

Neither the college nor its predecessor took up the option of a school council, promoted by a previous government but not a priority for the current government. There is,

however, an active Parents and Citizens Association (P & C). Currently, there is a president and no less than six vice-presidents. The president is busy and travels widely and so delegates much to the vice-presidents. There is a substantial workload and an executive officer is employed for 18 hours per week to assist with the accounts and other arrangements. The college provides the services of a minute secretary and a correspondence secretary. Most executive members stay on the executive for three to five years, ensuring stability and good processes for leadership succession. Representatives of the P & C serve on various college committees and provide a sounding board for the principal. The P & C was represented on the Facilities Committee that played an important role in the design of the new campus, which helped make this an 'environmentally friendly school'.

The P & C also has a significant fund-raising role, raising about \$90,000 in 2006, without which a school leader noted 'we'd be in a lot of trouble'. The P & C also operates an after school care service for students. Attendance at P & C meetings is normally about 30. While it is an active association, it seems that engagement has fallen somewhat over the last decade (when there was a primary school only). More parents are content to give a financial donation rather than provide their personal services and support for particular events or projects. One parent interviewed in this study suggested that there is 'a sense of guilt' when more direct assistance cannot be given. One parent at the college interviewed for this study, who also has an association with the nearby Catholic school, made an interesting observation in relation to the levels of parental engagement at the two schools. She considers it to be higher at the college than at the Catholic schools, perceiving that parents at the latter expect that their fees will meet the cost of services that are provided by volunteers at the government school. In this respect, assuming this view is a valid one, a case may be made that the level of 'social capital' is as high at this college as it is at the Catholic school, although of a different nature.

One mother, who participated in this study, is engaged in a number of ways in support of the school, including service as chairperson of a support group in one of the 'tracks' of the schools specialist programs, convening meetings on a monthly basis, raising money and assisting teachers in this area of the curriculum. She also assists with a book club, reads to children in her son's class and provides support on school excursions. She gains great satisfaction from the engagement. Not only does she like being around children but she appreciates that her support is of benefit to the school. She believes there is more parental engagement than in the other places where she has lived and considers it important that every person become engaged in one capacity or another.

Three student leaders shared their views on parental engagement during the study. Two were college captains. The process for selecting college captains is worthy of note because one aspect involves a connection with the wider community. Students are invited to submit applications should they wish to serve. Applicants then participate in a leadership camp at a nearby beach, where they engage in a range of team and leadership activities. Two students are then selected by teachers and attend a second camp at the same location. This is an overnight event and they are exposed to a range of perspectives on leadership from some people in fields other than education. Those interviewed were

remarkably articulate and perceptive about parent engagement at the college. They referred to 'lots of parents everywhere'. Apart from their reference to more visible engagement such as at the tuck shop, P & C, school fete, music committee and early learning, they described involvement in activities organised by students such as the disco. Notes go home inviting the assistance of parents and they 'never have a problem' securing their support. In general, students like parents to be engaged in school activities although, as noted earlier, there may be some 'embarrassment' for secondary students to have their parents around.

Parenting and Learning at Home

It is important to note that a number of schools in Queensland do not have enrolment management plans and parents are making considerable effort to exercise their choice of school. At this school, the strong community spirit explains the relatively high level of parental engagement dating from the time when the only state school was the small primary school. The challenge will be to maintain and expand this engagement in the face of growth of new housing estates, where two-income families are prevalent, and with the general drop-off of such engagement that occurs at the secondary level in most schools.

An example of the way in which parents go to considerable effort to choose a school for their children was provided by one parent interviewed for the study. She left the region several years ago to live in a city in another state and on return recalled the community as safe, rather beautiful in its appearance and with 'nice people'. It had a feel of 'country' about it. She visited the school on her return and felt very comfortable about her daughter enrolling, although the latter may attend another school in the area at a later stage because it specialises in an area in which both mother and daughter have an interest.

The local Catholic school is very close to the college and enrolls about 1500 students. There is little movement of students between the two schools, less than 20 in each direction each year. While parents are active in gathering information to guide their choice of schools, it seems that each college has established its niche in the market and there is little in the way of dysfunctional competition.

Collaborating with the Community

This school has a network of relationships with the wider community and other schools, particularly the nearby Catholic school. Indeed the degree of cooperation is evidenced by the two principals joining a delegation with other principals, P & C members, the regional directors of state and Catholic education, representatives of head office of Education Queensland and the Queensland Teachers Union that visited other states about six years ago. The delegation visited Adelaide, Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney to look at partnerships between the government and non-government sectors. There were no significant developments in the college as a result of these visits.

There will be a further opportunity for the school's engagement with the wider community with the possible development of a hall on the new site that will be available

for community use. It will accommodate about 600 people at an estimated cost of \$1.6 million. Adjacent to the hall is expected to be a community arts and sports centre funded and maintained by the local council. These facilities will also be available for the nearby Catholic school.

The college has an active Support a Reader program which was established state-wide by Education Queensland about ten years ago. The purpose is to support students who are at risk in reading. A feature of the program is the training of parents. When typically presented at the college, one of the support teachers for learning difficulties ‘trains’ parents by modelling a process that calls for the parent to read alone, for both parent and student to read together, and then for the student alone to read. Parents have the opportunity to observe on two occasions and then work directly with students, with debriefing by the support teacher. It is only after this cycle that the support teacher provides ‘the theory’, usually with the assistance of a video presentation. The aim is to empower the parent in the process. One of the support teachers considered the approach to be more effective than the traditional approach of providing ‘the theory’ at the start of the process. Take-up under the school’s adaptation is typically high. The chief indicator of success is the number and speed at which students return to the regular classroom. Three parents usually assist in the program in reading sessions conducted on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Ten parents have been involved so far in 2007, with a small number leaving the program when they took up full employment. Some are employed as part-time teacher aides in the college.

Another opportunity for parent engagement is presented in the Reading Recovery program, which is offered in years 4 and 5. Parents are invited to visit, observe and participate by preparing materials for children to take home and use in reading with their parents. The Reading Recovery program, however, will be discontinued by Education Queensland after 2007 in favour of a comprehensive professional development program over five days for all teachers at primary level. A similar strategy is being followed in other states, reflecting a general concern that action must be large-scale and comprehensive if all students are to read well. The issue at the college and elsewhere will be the speed and effectiveness of delivery of the new arrangements and whether a modified Reading Recovery program should be maintained in the transition.

Costs and Benefits

Two members of the administrative staff of the school hold or have held senior leadership positions in the P & C, so their views were of particular value in the study. They recalled the difficulties in getting a commitment from Education Queensland to extend the primary to the secondary level, thus creating the college. A sale of land generated the funds to enable this to occur at this school and also at the other college described in these case studies. These parent leaders were mindful of the significant responsibilities of the P & C in risk management, duty of care and legal liability, especially in respect to the after-hours school care service, which is effectively a licensed care centre. These are complexities in governance that were not evident in the past. It may be necessary in the future to outsource the operation of the facility. Both stressed the need to work hard to

maintain or preferably extend parental engagement as the school grows in the years ahead, especially as the new sub-divisions open up and residents are new to the area. They were mindful that, even though the level of parental engagement was presently relatively high, there is still only a core of people who are providing substantial support to the P & C.

It is apparent that parental engagement significantly benefits the school in a number of ways. Benefit to students, include the reading program, without which, as one school leader expressed it, many students may fall through the cracks. There are associated benefits to teachers who face the challenging task of personalising learning, especially for students at risk. Parents are supported through the after-hours care program. Social capital is enhanced in a variety of ways, such as the advocacy of a new campus and the creation of the college. Professional leadership, as provided by the principal, is a necessary condition to secure the engagement of parents on the scale currently evident at this college. The challenge will be to sustain and extend this as the college enters a period of rapid growth and new housing estates are opened up, bringing new parents to the area who may not have experienced the same levels of engagement in their children's education. Furthermore, more teachers will be needed to service a larger school and these new teachers must be acculturated.

Barriers and Gateways

As with many schools described in these case studies, parental engagement at this college also declines at the upper level of primary and in the secondary years. Three reasons were offered for this trend. One is that the opportunities for engagement are more evident in the early years when parents, especially mothers, are available and willing to assist in reading programs and provide support to teachers in other ways. They are also keen to have a presence as their children settle in to school. The second reason is the return to the workforce of these mothers once their children have settled. Some combine part-time work with support for the school but, increasingly, families are two-income families. The growth in population is largely occurring in new housing sub-divisions and it is likely that the mortgage payments and lifestyle changes require support from two incomes. One interviewee suggests that many carry a mortgage of \$500,000. A third reason offered by one member of staff during the study was that some students at the secondary level are 'embarrassed' by the presence of their parents and visits are 'discouraged'. This was affirmed by a student leader in interviews reported below.

There was a new opportunity for engaging parents in the start-up of the college in 2007 because of the addition of year 8. About 65 per cent of parents of new students attended an information evening and about 80 per cent attended parent-teacher interviews. These kinds of activities will be held every year as the school expands toward its projected enrolment of 2000. These are some noteworthy demographic changes in addition to the opening up of new housing sub-divisions. Shortage of local personnel resulted in about 120 nurses being recruited from England to work in and around Cairns. Many have young families and are looking for schools for their children.

Section 6.11 School 10

Summary

The school examined in this case study is a large primary school in a suburb of Cairns, which has been an active part of the local community for a significant period of time. Members of the school community reported a number of strategies used within the school to enhance communication between students, teachers and parents. These strategies include students' use of an email address book, where they can record their teachers' email addresses and a homework book, which can be used by parents and teachers to communicate about the student's progress. One teacher at this school also reported that she attempts to hold a meeting with the parents of each of her students at the beginning of the school year, to establish a relationship with them.

This school maintains a number of literacy programs for students in the early and middle years of primary school. These programs, which are actively supported by parent volunteers, have been reported to support students' literacy skills. Some students in these programs have made significant improvements in the results of their pre- and post-program testing.

Parents are invited by the school to contribute to students learning by running programs an area that interests them to a group of students for one hour each Friday. These have involved a range of activities such as painting, cooking, carpentry and soccer. Parents have also contributed their knowledge and skills for longer programs, such as a 10-week cross-stitching program.

The staff and leaders at this school indicated a number of programs that have been implemented to involve parents in school activities, including 'dad's night'. This evening event is for Fathers of students in the prep year and assists them in becoming more involved in their children's education.

Case Study

Context

This school is a primary school currently enrolling 640 students located in a suburb of Cairns located about 20 minutes drive from the CBD. The school continues to grow, reflecting housing development in the area. There are currently 50 students in Prep classes and this could rise to 75 in 2008. Twenty of the 640 students are Indigenous. Participants in this study reported that the parents of Indigenous students seem to 'fit in well' and lines of communication are good but they are not involved in the reading program and do not assist at the tuck shop.

This school was established on its present site in 1923 and the original building is still used as an IT facility. There have been five extensions since 1923. The school has 26 air conditioned teaching spaces, a covered play area, an administration block, resource

centre, tuck shop, school shop and Outside School Hours Care facility. The school received \$133,000 from the Department of Education, Science and Training of the Australian Government that has been allocated to a multi-purpose assembly area.

An earlier primary school was established nearby in 1896. The site of the current school was formerly a market garden. In appearance, location and its continuing connections over several generations, the school is very much a 'community school'. One of the cleaners, who has been an organiser of the school fete for many years, has served for 30 years. She was a student at the school as was her father and grandfather. She recalled that some parents have always been involved in one way or another, including reading and, some years ago, hearing children recite their 'times tables'. There are many current families with parents and grandparents who also attended the school. The registrar of the school has been on staff for 22 years. The principal has been serving in an acting capacity and was instated as principal during the period of this study. The community is generally at the higher end of the socioeconomic continuum. It was observed that 'few mothers don't work now'. However, many parents are in professions that allow flexibility in their work time, allowing many to contribute to the school. The school registrar indicated that more than 70 percent of parents pay the voluntary fees.

Communication

A teacher, who participated in this study, acknowledged that parents have much to share and contribute, but that the extent to which they can be involved is limited by their other commitments. This teacher arranges meetings of parents at the beginning of the year where each may get to know the teacher and her background and vice-versa. Interviews are arranged with parents at the end of each term or at any time at the request of parent or teacher. Telephone interviews are arranged if face-to-face meetings cannot be scheduled. There is increasing use of email since each of her students has an email address. Students have a 'homework book' and the teacher can include comments about the successes of each student on a weekly basis. She explained that the book is 'aimed at the child, but intended for parents to read'. She believes it is important for students 'to know that you know their families and that parents feel that it is easy to contact you'.

Volunteering

A number of parents are engaged in support of teachers in reading programs, especially in the early years (Literacy Block) and in years 4 and 5 ('Support a Reader'). One teacher outlines what is involved in a letter to parents at the start of the school year, inviting the involvement of parents in the Literacy Block scheduled on Tuesday and Thursday in the mornings. She reported that 'there are four groups, Red, Blue, Green and Yellow. The groups will make three rotations in the session. Parents will work with three groups for a half-hour each (9:00 – 9:30, 9:30 – 10:00, and 10:00 – 10:30). The groups parents work with will change during the session so they will not always be with the same group'. The purpose is stated in these terms: 'The power of the Literacy Block is that I am able to teach to the children's current needs and it allows me to place children in a group that best caters for those needs'. 'The groups are formed according to current Reading Levels,

considering writing skills and work habits also'. This teacher also writes a general letter to the parents of each of her students at the start of the school years outlining the routines of the class, the homework and reading programs, opportunities for parents to help, reward of good behaviour and a range of operational matters. She acknowledges that there is a considerable amount of planning, but described the impact as 'powerful and positive'. She has taught at higher levels in the school and observed that parent involvement tends to decrease after the early years.

One teacher conducted the state-wide 'Support a Reader' program in her class (see below for data on student achievement in this program). She has also implemented an innovative approach to engaging parents based on a practice that had been adopted across the school when she was a teacher in England. Known as 'Golden Time', it is conducted for one hour on a Friday. Various parents with particular skills conduct sessions for students who are organised in five groups. These involve activities in areas as varied as painting, cooking, carpentry and soccer. Students who have performed well in the classroom during the week get first choice of group. Tokens are awarded for good performance. The teacher reports that the behaviour of students is enhanced through their participation. Students are encouraged to invite their parents to be involved. Parents support this class in other ways, for example, mothers who conduct cross-stitching classes over 10 weeks (another activity that she had implemented in England). Preparation for involving parents in these activities is not unduly onerous now that it is routine, although more time is required than in England, where every teacher has a teacher aide for one half-day each week.

It is evident that learning would be impaired if parent engagement of the kind described above were to be abandoned. A Learning Support teacher, who has been at the school for 15 years, was emphatic that this would be the case in reading. She referred, in particular, to the state-wide 'Support a Reader' program in years 4 and 5 to which parents contribute. Improvement for 16 students in pre- and post- applications of the Neale Reading Test over six months in 2004 ranged from one month to one year and seven months on accuracy and from zero months to two years and 11 months on comprehension. No student showed a loss in learning. A similar range of improvement was found for the same cohorts in 2003. Workshops are conducted to provide parents with the skills to make a contribution. It is a serious problem if parents drop out during the program. While parental involvement is mainly in the early years and again in years 4 and 5, parents make a valuable contribution across all years in the Arts, Music and Physical Education. Few 'negatives' were identified, with the benefits outweighing the time that teachers require to organise involvement and the occasional instance where a parent endeavours to tell a teacher how they ought to be teaching.

Fundraising is one method of engagement with the community which has proved very successful. In 2006 the annual school fete raised about \$25,000. When it was first held 26 years ago it raised about \$2,000. Local businesses donate or discount items for sale at the fete, for example, bread or sausages. Willingness to support appears to be particularly evident when the owners have children at the school.

An extended discussion was held with a group of eight parents during the visit to the school for this study. An invitation had been sent to all parents in the school newsletter. Of these eight, there was one male and seven female, including the President of the P & C. Discussion focused on five questions: how are parents engaged at the school; how does this engagement occur, what are the successes / benefits / high points, what are the pitfalls / problems / low points, and how can more parents become involved at the school? Each of the approaches described earlier were identified. Particular attention was given to the activities of the P & C which conducts its work through three 'business units': tuck shop, Outside School Hours Care, and the uniform shop. The relatively formal approach is necessary because of the funding arrangements and legal liabilities. A P & C liaison officer is employed for 15 hours per week to administer the affairs of the body.

Parenting and Learning at Home

The enrolment levels at this school are expected to grow, in response to increased housing developments in the area. According to Deputy Principal, who has been at the school for 12 years, there is a degree of uncertainty about possible enrolments and of this growth each year because parents tend to 'shop around' in their choice of school. They may initially 'sign up' at several schools before making a decision. It may not be until the first day of school that exact enrolments are known. Some students travel quite a distance to attend the school. Two are from a small village a considerable distance from Cairns and this means that parents will travel past a number of schools to attend this school. A few mothers drive their children to school and spend their days in and around Cairns on various activities before collecting them for the return trip home. Some mothers who help in the tuck shops often bring their pre-school age children and this provides an opportunity to assess the suitability of the school. It seems that the school does not face significant competition from private schools in the area. A few graduates from this school go to private schools but most to state schools. This school is attractive because of its specialist music program.

Costs and Benefits

Parents, who participated in this study, identified several benefits of their engagement in their child's education. Some of these were personal in the sense of the opportunity it presents to learn about and support the school: 'keeping a finger on the pulse of the school', 'our children get a lot out of us being here – it is satisfying when they give such positive feedback', 'I learn how I can help my child', 'I learn who my child's friends are' and 'I can let teachers know they are well supported – I want teachers to know this'. Some of the 'headline' benefits or stories (in some cases they have indeed been headlines in newspaper reports) include collecting shoes for people in Mongolia (10,000 in 2006), recycling and other conservation initiatives, home support for students who read very large numbers of books and are thereby recognised in the school 'parade' (assembly), parental engagement in the coaching of sports teams, and involvement that secures good outcomes at the school fete, which were particular good in 2006 when a greater team effort was required because the regular organiser was not available.

The low points of engagement which parents report are generally related to finding the time to come to the school, and this sometimes leads to feelings of guilt when attendance is not possible. It was felt that engagement should be greater than it is and that too many people do not know or understand its value. Some may see the situation as an ‘insiders and outsiders’ involvement or that ‘it’s for mums only’.

Several suggestions were made to improve the situation, including more and larger notice boards inside and outside the school, more effective use of networks so that invitations were extended to more people in a face-to-face manner, more extensive use of email, enhancing the school’s website, and wider dissemination of newsletters and minutes of meetings. It was acknowledged that part of the newsletter is now related to parent activities, including the P & C, and this is printed on coloured paper to contrast it with regular news that is printed on white paper.

It was fortunate that during the visit to study parent engagement at this school that a ‘dad’s night’ was conducted for fathers of students in the Prep classes. Such an activity would serve to counter the view noted above that ‘it’s for mums only’. The ‘dad’s night’ activity was observed but formal interviews or discussions were not conducted by the researcher as these would tend to distract from the nature of the event. There are about 50 students in the Prep classes and an informal count suggested that about 25 parents or male caregivers attended for at least part of the hour set aside for the occasion, which was conducted from 5 to 6 pm. In most instances, the fathers were seated on the floor and participated with their children in a range of simple activities of a kind that would occur in a normal school day, for example, using building blocks to construct something. As in many schools for classes at this level, the rooms were particularly stimulating in appearance, with a mass of colours, small play and learning areas, a multitude of activities, and an atmosphere of energy and excitement. Fathers seemed happy to be with their children; the children seemed pleased if not proud to have their fathers around. Fathers who were not directly engaged in this manner took the opportunity to talk to teachers and teacher aides as well as the principal. There were no formal presentations.

Despite the impressive engagement of some parents in the reading and other programs, as summarised in this study, the over-riding impression was that only a minority of parents are engaged in any significant way (‘a lot of folk just don’t know what goes on’), but that even this limited involvement is highly valued, with an impact on learning especially evident in programs like ‘Support a Reader’.

Section 7 Implications for Policy and Practice

Contextual Difference between Schools

Schools are not homogeneous. Every school functions in a unique social, cultural, economic and geographical context. As such, policies and practices that are successful in enhancing parental engagement in one school may not work in another. Schools need to devise local involvement strategies which take into account the specific challenges facing parents in their school community. The chief implication for policy is to encourage the networking of ideas between schools in order to share involvement strategies and develop best practice.

Variables in Parental Engagement

One of the major findings of the literature, which is supported by the case studies of Queensland state schools, is that parents tend to be more involved in the early years of schooling. The decrease of parental engagement in secondary schooling, however, does not necessarily occur with the types of engagement that take place in the home. While parents of primary school students tend to be more involved in activities at the school site than parents of students in secondary school, the level of parental engagement with their children's education at home appears to be maintained throughout all levels of schooling. In fact, in our case studies students in upper secondary school reported that their parents become more involved in supporting them, assisting with organisational skills and helping them choose post-schooling pathways. These findings suggest that there is a need for a broader definition of parental engagement. The chief implication for policy and practice is to publicise and praise engagement of this kind at all levels but especially for the support of children in secondary schools.

School Choice

Parents who participated in the case studies reported that they spent significant time and gathered a large amount of information to help them select schools for their children. The evidence-base for the relationship between school choice and improved student achievement is inconclusive. Despite this, parents in our case studies suggested that parents who are active in selecting their child's school are more likely to be involved in school activities. This suggestion is supported by a recent Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) study of parent opinions of government schools, which suggests that the choice of school may relate to higher levels of parent satisfaction with the school (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007). The chief implication for policy and practice is to maintain the provision for parental choice of school and implement processes to make it easier for parents to gain access to valid information to guide that choice.

Invitations to Participate

The research examined in this report has found that schools can facilitate parental engagement by inviting parents to be active in the school and their children's education. This finding has been supported by key stakeholders in the case studies. These key stakeholders reported that the school has been successful in raising levels of parent involvement by encouraging individuals to participate in school activities. The chief implication for policy and practice is to publicise the importance of welcoming parents to schools and to use every means, including appropriate media, to secure the involvement of parents.

School Atmosphere

Parents are most likely to participate in school activities when their child attends a welcoming and friendly school. Such an atmosphere can be created in a number of ways, including the entry to and quality of buildings, front office staff, the teaching staff or rooms and other facilities for meetings. The case studies for this project suggest, however, that the principal's attitudes towards involving parents often have a significant influence on the school atmosphere. The chief implication for policy and practice is to encourage these strategies, which include the incorporation of relevant features in building design and professional development.

Effective Home-School Communication

Cuttance and Stokes' (2000) research into school and student reporting suggests that parents would like further information on the curriculum and changes to teaching and learning. Parents of secondary students who were involved in this study reported that they often felt daunted by their children's school work as they did not always understand the teaching and learning methods or the content of the work. We propose that the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Art and its schools could be using a number of forms of available technology to provide parents with all required information about education, the schools in Queensland, the particular programs being used in each school and all aspects of their child's performance and involvement at school.

Australian and international research findings support the idea that effective communication is vital to the creation of high levels of parent engagement in schools. The majority of schools in Queensland use several methods to communicate with parents, including the use of student achievement reports, school newsletters and parent-teacher interviews. Schools from the case studies also use innovative forms of communication with parents and the wider community, including regular radio programming, Short Message Services (SMS), websites and email. Research has shown, however, that the effectiveness of communication, particularly between parents and teachers, is significantly more important than the frequency. In other words, regardless of the forms of communication used by the schools, it is important that all communication between parents and the community is effective. School leaders, teachers and all other members of

school staff need to understand the importance of communication and be trained to effectively communicate with members of the school community.

In terms of home-school communication there are two chief implications for policy and practice. The first is for the Department of Education, Training and the Arts and schools to further enhance the range of technologies in schools to ensure that all parents are able to receive information about their children's learning. Second, school staff need to be supported and trained to effectively communicate with members of the school community.

Parenting Programs

All research, including our case studies, offered endorsements of the literacy and numeracy programs that include parents. Although there is little evidence to demonstrate that parents' participation in these programs may have a positive impact on their child's academic achievement in all subject areas, research suggests that students generally benefit from their parents' participation in these types of activities. Parents also report that by being involved in these activities, they feel that they can better understand their child's schooling. The chief implication for policy and practice is to sustain support for programs that secure the engagement of parents in literacy and numeracy programs. Engaging parents in the community setting for Indigenous students is affirmed.

Decision-Making

While the research has not found any link between parents' participation in the Parents and Citizens Association or the School Council and improved student outcomes, both a recent Australian study (Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006) and the case studies of Queensland state schools suggest that parents who participate in these forms of governance feel greater ownership of school decisions. Schools are able to receive valuable feedback from the school community. The involvement of parents in these decision-making processes, therefore, may have indirect benefits for students. The chief implication for policy and practice is to publicise these benefits of participation in P & C and School council, where the latter exist. No change to governance arrangements are indicated in research on parent engagement.

Queensland Context

Participants in the case studies raised a number of issues related to location, such as the distance travelled to reach schools, the heat in classrooms and the problems that the drought is causing to people who live in rural areas, which are specific to the Australian and the Queensland context. Unfortunately, there is little research on many types of parental involvement in Australian schools and an even smaller amount of research on Queensland schools. The chief implication for policy and practice is to commission research to gain a greater understanding of these contextual variables and their impact on parent engagement.

Community Liaison Officers

There is limited research, both in Australian and international contexts, on the efficacy of employing community liaison officers. Staff and parents from schools in the case studies that employed liaison officers reported that these appointments had greatly strengthened the relationships between the school and the community. The benefits of the community liaison officer's role were particularly stressed by schools in areas with a large Indigenous population. Three Australian studies cited in this report indicate that Indigenous community liaison officers can assist in overcoming cultural barriers to facilitate effective communication between the school and Indigenous members of the school community (Goos et al. 2007; Gribble and Rennie 2003; Saulwick Muller Social Research 2006). This report suggests that further empirical research is undertaken to examine the efficacy of the community liaison role, with a particular focus on the role of community liaison officers in Indigenous communities.

Section 7.1 Evidence for Policy Implications

Implication for Policy and Practice	Evidence Base
Contextual Differences between Schools	Section 2.2 Communication Section 2.6 Collaborating with the Community Section 4.4 School Structures and Supports to Enhance Parental Involvement Section 6 Case Studies of Parental Involvement in Queensland State Schools
Variables in Parental Engagement	Section 2.2 Communication Section 2.4 Learning at Home Section 3.2 Communication Section 3.3 Volunteering Section 4.2 The Role of Students
School Choice	Section 2.1 Parenting Section 3.1 Parenting Section 6.3 School 2 Section 6.5 School 4 Section 6.6 School 6 Section 6.10 School 9

Implication for Policy and Practice	Evidence Base
Invitations to Participate	<p>Section 2.2 Communication Section 4.1 The Role of the School Section 4.4 School Structures and Supports to Enhance Parental Involvement Section 6.3 School 2 Section 6.4 School 3 Section 6.5 School 4 Section 6.8 School 7 Section 6.10 School 9</p>
School Atmosphere	<p>Section 4.1 The Role of the School Section 6.3 School 2 Section 6.4 School 3 Section 6.5 School 4 Section 6.8 School 7 Section 6.10 School 9</p>
Effective Home-School Communication	<p>Section 2.2 Communication Section 3.2 Communication Section 4.1 The Role of the School Section 6 Case Studies of Parental Involvement in Queensland State Schools</p>
Parenting Programs	<p>Section 2.4 Learning at Home Section 2.6 Collaborating with the Community Section 3.6 Collaborating with the Community Section 6.7 School 6 Section 6.11 School 10</p>
Decision-Making	<p>Section 2.5 Decision-Making Section 3.5 Decision-Making Section 6 Case Studies of Parental Involvement in Queensland State Schools</p>

Implication for Policy and Practice	Evidence Base
Queensland Context	Section 5.2 Gaps, Inconsistencies and Limitations of the Literature Section 6 Case Studies of Parental Involvement in Queensland State Schools
Community Liaison Officers	Section 2.2 Communication Section 3.2 Communication Section 4.1 The Role of the School Section 6.5 School 4 Section 6.7 School 6 Section 6.9 School 8 Section 6.11 School 10

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