Progressing Parental Engagement School Fact Sheet

Building a strong culture of parent-school engagement

Parental engagement recognises the important role that both parents and teachers play in developing positive attitudes towards learning and education for children, building their motivation and confidence as learners, and fostering their enjoyment of learning.

This fact sheet aims to assist schools to strengthen a culture of parental engagement.

It includes information to help review parental engagement strategies and to create change. The fact sheet also aims to encourage connections to community groups and other resources in the ACT to support family-school partnerships and parental engagement.

Building a framework for parental engagement in your school

Parental engagement recognises that both parents and teachers play an important role in children's learning, development and wellbeing, and that children generally do better when there are positive connections between the different spaces they learn in.

A key aspect of parental engagement involves **family-school partnerships**.

Family-school partnerships involve the ways families and schools work together to support children's academic achievement. This includes connecting what children are learning at school with how they learn at home; helping families to respond early to children's learning challenges; and extending children's learning around the things they are passionate about.

Benefits of parental engagement

Parents make a difference.

In fact, they make their greatest contribution to their child's education at home.

Research shows that **family-led learning** is vital. This involves all the ways that parents support learning through everyday activities, and during the time their children aren't at school. This idea lies at the heart of what is meant by parental engagement.

Schools benefit significantly through the effect of successful parental engagement on student learning outcomes. Benefits include improved connections with the community, improved school image within the community, and improved family and community satisfaction with the school. Well targeted and widespread parent and community participation can contribute to school improvement in a number of ways, including:

- Sending clear signals to students about the value of education

- Ensuring school decisions are broadly representative of the school community

- Ensuring school activities and actions are respectful and representative of local cultures

- Building mutual commitment by families to take action in the home that supports learning at school

- Enabling teachers and school leaders to access expertise and perspectives that support curriculum.

How to explore parental engagement practices in your school

Understanding the nature and extent of a school's parental engagement focus is important. These questions may also be useful to ask:

- Is parental engagement a recognised topic of staff meetings, professional development, and induction of new staff?

- Does the school have a clear picture of its own community? What are their needs, and how does this apply to the school?

- How do parents and community members participate in school activities? How can the school build parental engagement in activities that are focused on student learning?

- Does the school celebrate events that matter to the school community, such as significant cultural days?

- How does the school community recognise and support volunteers? How can the work of volunteers be focused to contribute to teaching and learning?

- How can schools plan for parental engagement to make participation as easy as possible? For example, how can scheduling and notification about school events and activities be organised to maximise parental engagement?

- How can communication about parental engagement opportunities be designed to maximise engagement? How can the school mobilise influential community members and parents to engage other community members and parents?

- How can appropriate and effective communication channels be selected and used to reach parents and community members? What support do school staff members, parents and community need to use various forms of media (including online and social media) appropriately and effectively?

Cultural changes in schools

The key to creating a successful culture for parental engagement rests on choosing the right strategies to meet the needs of students and the wider school community.

Dr Joyce Epstein, Director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University (USA), has developed a framework for 'Keys to Successful Partnerships'.

Epstein's framework provides useful illustrations of how schools might strengthen their culture of parental engagement across six types of involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making and Collaborating with Community.

Type of parental engagement	Examples of parental engagement strategies
Parenting Strategies that assist families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students. These strategies also assist schools to better understand families.	Workshops and DVDs on parenting and child development at each age and year level Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g. family literacy, college or training programs) Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and parenting, including clothing swap shops, food co-ops, parent-to-parent groups Home visiting programs or community meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families Provide information and referral services to support parents in their role as parents Provide cultural awareness training for school staff and parents Annual survey for families to share information about their children's goals, strengths, and special talents.
Communicating Strategies that help to promote effective two-way communications among schools, families, and community members or groups about school programs and student progress.	Create a family-friendly school Do families feel welcome at the school? Consider the placement of 'welcome' signs around the school Is there a language barrier between school and family? Are parents able to attend meetings at the times they are scheduled? Do parents have transportation to attend events/meetings? Do parents and family members feel that the school staff are open and receptive to parental engagement? Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families and community members. Consider education and training programs for teachers and school leaders that prepare them to communicate with parents effectively Enhance communication with parents through effective forms of school-to-home and home-to school communication about school programs and children's progress Effective newsletters including information about questions, reactions, and suggestions Provide very specific information and feedback to parents about their child's progress Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, emails and other communications Appoint a community liaison person as a link between parents and the school, in order to build both teacher and parent capacity to communicate with one another.

Type of parental engagement	Examples of parental engagement strategies
Volunteering Strategies that organise and support family and community members in their efforts to support the school and its students.	Annual survey (or other inclusive method) to identify interests, talents, and availability of volunteers Develop a database of parent and community skills, talents and availability to draw on when required Assess the volunteer needs of the school and list the many ways parents and families can participate and interact with school and the school community Appoint class-parent representatives who can become a welcoming informal network of support Provide a parent room or family space for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families Conduct a regular review of schedules for students' performances, games, and assemblies to encourage all families to attend as daytime and evening audiences Issue invitations for parent participation that are personal and specific, rather than general.
Learning at home Strategies that assist families to boost home-learning conditions to support student academic achievement by involving families with their children on homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions.	Information for families on required skills in all subjects at each year level Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home Information on how to assist students with skills that they need to improve Regular schedule of interactive homework that requires students to demonstrate and discuss what they are learning in class Arrange for folders of student work to be sent home regularly for review and comment Calendars with daily or weekly activities for parents and students to do at home or in the community.
Decision Making Strategies that include families and community members as partners in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.	Arrange for the school community to be consulted on new school policies, e.g. assessment, reporting and curriculum changes Encourage active participation in the formal parents' organisation in the school council and/or P&C, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation Establish networks to link all families with parent representatives Offer training and support to parent leaders.
Collaborating with Community Strategies that coordinate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development, and provide services to the community.	Involve family or community representatives in small group discussions about the role each group or person can play in ensuring the success of every child Build strong connections between schools and community organisations. For example, invite local service groups to become involved with the school in a variety of ways, such as mentoring students and speaking to classes Create connections with local health and welfare services to facilitate access to such support for the school community Integrate school partnerships with cultural groups, government and non-government agencies to support activities, e.g. play group, breakfast clubs Encourage community use of school facilities, e.g. community rooms, library, halls and gyms.

CASE STUDY
Building a shared learning community at Monash Primary

Monash Primary School recognises that parents and the community play a vital role in the education of children. It is through this understanding that building and maintaining strong and effective family-school partnerships are critical and a core priority within the Monash Primary School Strategic Plan. In 2013 the newly appointed Principal, Mr Shane Carpenter worked to enhance parental partnerships through the establishment of parent forums, and open and active communication through Facebook, parent surveys and informal conversations.

"I invited parents to share their ideas and I welcomed feedback. I listened to the things that were working, and those that weren't and needed enhancing. I listened and learnt about the community, and through this, I changed things" (Shane Carpenter, Principal)*.*

Mr Carpenter worked closely with the school community, school board and teachers to examine current school practice and worked at enhancing positive parent-teacher relationships through the development of a **Family School Partnership Statement** - *"This document outlined our shared belief and vision, and enabled us to ensure all our actions centered on this understanding"* (Shane Carpenter, Principal).

• Beginning of the year parent/teacher conferences were implemented. These reports involved the development of shared goals with input from parents, teachers and children and established a shared learning environment from the very beginning.

• Transition processes were established to ensure effective communication between parents, teachers and students.

• Input from parents was invited to help staff become more aware of their children's academic, social, and emotional needs. This process was based on the belief that parents are the primary educators of their children and have valuable information to share with staff to make learning more meaningful and personalised for the children.

Through an identified need and further community input a **Community Hub** was developed in 2014 to support parent-school partnerships and to assist parents in supporting the wellbeing of their children. The Hub was driven by core parents and community members at Monash Primary who utilised an unused school building and transformed it into a place where families and community could meet, engage and learn from each other. The development of the physical environment of the hub was the result of cooperation between the school, various businesses from within the Tuggeranong region and a group of committed parents and extended family members from within the school community who supported the project with labor.

The school employed a Community Hub Coordinator (also a parent from within the community) who supported the delivery of a range of parenting and community services including:

- Parenting Courses: Cool Kids, Circle of Security, Playgroup, Dads & Sons and Mums & Daughter groups.
- Parenting Information: A Hub magazine that provides links to external agencies and research based parenting strategies and advice.
- Parental Support: School clothing pool, breakfast club and pre-made meals for family dinners.
- Community Partnerships: A community walking group, Goodwin Village morning tea and reading group and partnerships with the Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre.

"The Hub is community owned and community driven - it provides a safe and welcoming space, where parents can share work together to support their children" (Virginia Martin, Hub Coordinator)

Research and resources

There is a wide body of research available which supports the need for effective parental engagement strategies. Several Australian guides are provided here for reference.

Family – School Partnerships Framework – A guide for schools and families
http://www.familyschool.org.au/files/3013/8451/8364/Family-school_partnerships_framework.pdf

References

Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2008). Family–School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families

Epstein, J. L. (1995, May). School/family/community partnerships: caring for the children we share. Phi Delta Kappan, 76, 701e712.
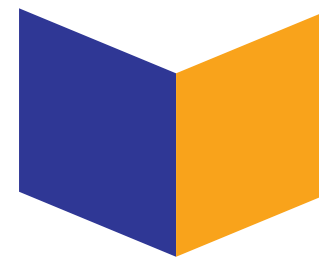
About this project

The ACT Education and Training Directorate partnered with the non-profit Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), The Catholic Education Office of the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Catholic School Parents Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn and the Association of Parents and Friends of ACT Schools. Together, the alliance developed a shared understanding of parental engagement in the ACT, based on what the evidence shows has the biggest impact and the things that matter most to ACT families and schools. The international evidence has been reviewed and parents and teachers have been consulted on what is important to them.

Our Partners

The ACT Education and Training Directorate partnered with the non-profit Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), The Catholic Education Office of the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Catholic School Parents Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn and the Association of Parents and Friends of ACT Schools. Together, the alliance developed a shared understanding of parental engagement in the ACT, based on what the evidence shows has the biggest impact and the things that matter most to ACT families and schools. The international evidence has been reviewed and parents and teachers have been consulted on what is important to them.

More resources will be available in 2015.