



# 'Telling their stories' and 'Learning from their stories'

## School case studies in parental engagement



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fifteen schools in Low Socio-economic Status (Low SES) communities across Australia participated in the case study project. The case studies feature schools summarising their parental engagement strategies, highlighting common good practice themes and challenges.



**Australian Government**

**Department of Education, Employment  
and Workplace Relations**





## *Acknowledgement*

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For further information about the national key reform projects:

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/SmarterSchools/Pages/NationalKeyReformProjects.aspx>

## **Disclaimer**

This document has been prepared on behalf of the Parental Engagement Taskforce. It is not a statement of Australian Government policy. The information in this publication was based on interviews and information received in good faith from the organisations involved in the case studies project for the purposes of this publication. No responsibility is accepted by the Minister, Department or Parental Engagement Taskforce for any errors or omissions contained within this publication. No liability will be accepted for loss or damage arising from reliance upon any information included here.

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## Executive summary

Parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home, combined with parental involvement in schooling, is critical to children's learning. When schools and families work together in partnership, children are more likely to perform better academically, stay in school longer and enjoy their schooling.

The *National Collaboration Project: Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status Communities* was one of six key reform projects supporting jurisdictions to implement the Smarter Schools National Partnerships reforms. The project aimed to advance the identification, promotion and implementation of good practice in parental engagement in low socio-economic status (SES) communities as a critical factor for improving student attendance, engagement in learning and learning achievement.

## The case studies project

As part of the project, fifteen Australian schools were invited to participate in the development of case studies about parental engagement in their school. Some schools were from rural, remote or very remote areas, but most were in urban metropolitan or regional centres in South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria and New South Wales.

The case studies document how these schools from different communities and locations have gone about strengthening school-family relationships by introducing the school, outlining the key strategies and activities in place and the progress and outcomes being experienced. The case studies also highlight the critical success factors and some of the issues facing each school community in their endeavour to ensure good educational outcomes for their children. They provide examples of what approaches, strategies and activities have worked well and improved parental engagement outcomes as a reference point for other school communities to consider and draw upon.

## Good practices in parental engagement in schooling

Good practice or effective practice in parental engagement in schooling focuses on two interrelated elements: parents' and families' engagement in their children's learning and parents' and families' engagement in the everyday life of the school community and school system. It is clear that at the heart of good practice in parental engagement is the development of respectful and collaborative relationships between parents and schools with the common goal of nurturing student wellbeing and achievement.

The seminal Australian publication 'Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families' (2008)<sup>1</sup> articulates a way forward for building partnerships between families and schools, highlighting seven key dimensions of effective family-school partnerships. The 'Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning' resource, also developed as part of this national key reform project, provides comprehensive information about the elements of effective practice for each of the seven dimensions and includes a new assessment tool that school communities can use to reflect on and plan action to further parental engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> This publication was produced by the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau. The Bureau was established by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) to promote the engagement of families with their schools with funding provided by the Australian Government.



## Case study schools

Fifteen schools in Low Socio-economic Status (Low SES) communities across Australia participated in the case study project. The case studies feature schools summarising their parental engagement strategies.

| School<br>(enrolment data My School website 2009)  | Title and summary   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Bathurst West Public School</b><br/>New South Wales<br/>Student enrolment 373</p>  | <p><i><b>The impact of an inspirational principal</b></i><br/>By valuing home, school and community partnerships, this school has made significant progress in building a cohesive school community. Under strong leadership and by adopting a child-centred focus, the school now works with parents as equal partners in their children's learning.</p> |
| <p><b>Bradshaw Primary School</b><br/><b>Irrkerlantye Unit</b><br/>Northern Territory<br/>Student enrolment 297<br/>Irrkerlantye Unit enrolment 65</p> | <p><i><b>The power of respectfulness</b></i><br/>Reaching out to parents by a student support officer and teachers and a commitment from the school leadership to genuinely listen to parents have resulted in the development of respectful relationships between parents and the Unit.</p>  |
| <p><b>Christie Downs Primary School</b><br/>South Australia<br/>Student enrolment 150</p>  | <p><i><b>Getting parents involved right from the start</b></i><br/>Parents are able to extend their own learning while actively involved in their children's learning through the multiple points for connection created by this school and the individualised and small group approaches to parental engagement used.</p>                                |
| <p><b>Coolbellup Community School</b><br/>Western Australia<br/>Student enrolment 213</p>  | <p><i><b>Putting down new roots</b></i><br/>Empowering key parents has been an important strategy for building parental engagement in this relatively new primary school, created by amalgamating several other schools, as it puts down 'new roots' in the local community.</p>  |
| <p><b>Dallas Primary School</b><br/>Victoria<br/>Student enrolment 320</p>   | <p><i><b>How to engage culturally diverse parents</b></i><br/>This school has found effective ways of engaging families from diverse language and cultural backgrounds into their children's learning and the school community. It has created a place where difference is accepted and respected.</p>  |
| <p><b>East Waikiki Primary School</b><br/>Western Australia<br/>Student enrolment 471</p>  | <p><i><b>How a focused engagement priority brings success</b></i><br/>Now widely recognised as an inspirational model for promoting an Indigenous perspective within school communities, this school has made engaging parents of its Indigenous students a priority focus with a positive impact.</p>  |



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| <p><b>Elizabeth Schools Connections</b><br/>South Australia<br/>Catherine McAuley, St Thomas More<br/>and St Mary Magdalene's<br/>Student enrolment 395, 364, 195</p> | <p><b><i>Three schools, one parental engagement project</i></b><br/>Three schools have joined together to establish a project, governed by its own board, which is specifically focussed on increasing the confidence of parents to engage with their children's learning and their school community.</p>  |
| <p><b>Katoomba North Public School</b><br/>New South Wales<br/>Student enrolment 155</p>  | <p><b><i>The school as community hub</i></b><br/>Now recognised and valued by the local community as a focal point where parents can meet, the community hub established within the school is the centre for building the capacity of parents and the community so that both become partners in supporting the learning and social development of students at the school.</p>                                      |
| <p><b>Manyallaluk Homeland School</b><br/>Northern Territory<br/>Student enrolment 22</p>   | <p><b><i>A community takes the lead</i></b><br/>Community initiated, this school is an integral part of the community, who place a high value on education. Parents take a leadership role in supporting other parents to become involved in their children's learning and to become active partners in their children's education.</p>  |
| <p><b>Moe Elizabeth St. Primary School</b><br/>Victoria<br/>Student enrolment 130</p>   | <p><b><i>A school takes the lead in a community partnership</i></b><br/>Taking the lead in working collaboratively with the community, this school has initiated a number of important programs that form the core of its parental engagement strategies, with a particular focus on parents with children in the early years.</p>   |
| <p><b>Our Lady of the Sacred Heart</b><br/>South Australia<br/>Student enrolment 633</p>  | <p><b><i>An open door on the world</i></b><br/>With students from a variety of cultural backgrounds and a wide range of languages spoken at home, this school has been proactive in getting to know the families within its school community and highlighting the value of cultural diversity in school life through its actions and partnerships.</p>   |
| <p><b>St Albans Meadows Primary School</b><br/>Victoria<br/>Student enrolment 353</p>   | <p><b><i>The central importance of relationships</i></b><br/>This school has developed a shared vision of valuing the role of parents in the delivery of high quality programs for their children. Parents have high aspirations for their children and their involvement as co-educators is valued and respected. The school is recognised as a teacher education centre in the field of parental engagement.</p> |
| <p><b>St Brendan's Primary School</b><br/>New South Wales<br/>Student enrolment 392</p>   | <p><b><i>How a school became a Community's central resource</i></b><br/>Through the development of 'personnel infrastructure', a whole school approach to pastoral care and encouraging personal approaches to connecting parents and school staff, this school community has made significant progress in building parental and local capacity and is seen by the community as a central resource.</p>            |



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| <p><b>Toukley Public School</b><br/>New South Wales<br/>Student enrolment 533</p>    | <p><b><i>Putting parents and children at the centre of school life</i></b><br/>By placing parents and children at the centre of school life, this school has been transforming the school culture into one that unites school and family. This has included promoting high expectations and aspirations in regard to tertiary education for their students.</p> |
| <p><b>Wilcannia Central School</b><br/>New South Wales<br/>Student enrolment 101</p> | <p><b><i>Rebuilding a school, regenerating a town</i></b><br/>This school is an important part of the fabric of the town. School staff, parents, community members and town and business leaders are working together to build the foundations for strong parental engagement by using every opportunity to encourage family participation in the school.</p>   |

## Findings and common themes

All 15 case study schools have been working with commitment and purpose to strengthen school-family relationships and support parental engagement in their children's learning and schooling. They provide insights into and understanding about successful parental engagement initiatives and what works well, for whom and in what contexts. In every school the combination of strategies and outcomes varied, reflecting the school's specific circumstances. As a consequence, each case study school is on its own unique journey in building and sustaining parental engagement in the life of their school community.

A number of common themes emerged from the case studies' accounts of the approaches and actions that the schools have taken and intend to take to continue to foster the involvement of parents and families. The themes, drawn from the practical experience of the case study schools, highlight and reinforce a number of the features of effective practice and in this way provide an important contribution to the evidence base about what works in strengthening parental engagement.

These common themes were:

- Developing a school culture that values parental engagement. Central to this is the school leadership team's role in promoting the importance of successful partnerships with families and an inclusive ethos within the school.
- Creating a school environment that welcomes parents. This may include dedicating space within the school grounds as a meeting place for parents or creating a community hub.
- Sharing high expectations about learning outcomes for all students and developing an open dialogue about children's learning.
- Building the capacity of parents to support their children's learning. For example, by offering opportunities for parents to learn about child development and contemporary teaching practices in areas such as literacy and numeracy and by providing practical suggestions about what parents can do to assist their children's learning.
- Parents encouraging other parents to become involved. This may include supporting parents in taking on a leadership role in engaging other parents and families.
- Reaching out through making personal contact with families and creating opportunities for parents and school staff to regularly talk and meet informally, such as phone calls to parents or after school as parents pick up their children, as well as formally.



- Offering opportunities to parents for their own learning and development, including accredited and community based learning, and providing a dedicated learning space for parents
- Connecting with parents in the early years so that parents can begin to network with other parents, find out about school organisation and how children learn from play experiences.
- Using school resources effectively to support parental engagement. This may include dedicating resources to an identified community liaison role or position to directly engage with and support families, especially those who may be harder to reach.
- Leveraging additional resources from outside the school, such as health related programs or access to specialist personnel, and fostering increased connection with the school through providing some of these within the school environment.
- Enlisting the support of community leaders and members and community organisations in encouraging greater parent, family and community participation in the life of the school, including in governance and decision making processes.

Ongoing collaborative partnerships had been established between a number of case study schools and community organisation with the common goal of support the education, health and wellbeing of local children and their families.

## Some challenges in parental engagement

The case studies provide numerous examples of the action that schools can take to strengthen parental engagement in their school community. However, the case studies also outlined some of the challenges that the schools were experiencing. While the challenges identified often reflected each school's specific context and circumstances, three key challenges were identified by a number of the case study schools.

These challenges were:

- Establishing and maintaining a clear and commonly understood framework for parental engagement within the school community so that parents, families, school staff and community organisations were all working towards a well identified common goal. This often required creating a new culture with the school community that recognised, valued and worked at developing strong relationships with parents.
- Empowering parents in their partnerships with schools. Parents needed opportunities to increase their knowledge and understanding about the structure, language and organisation of schools and to build their confidence in their own abilities and capacity to engage with the school. As well, there needed to be visible commitment from the school leadership to building relationships with parents as equal partners.
- Sustaining the commitment and continuity of the resources needed to support parental engagement. Considerable effort was often needed to source and maintain funding and short term funding arrangements made it difficult to sustain programs and develop and retain the expertise needed to facilitate parental engagement strategies and activities. System wide policies and processes are needed that allow for the ongoing commitment of resources to support and strengthen parental engagement as a key component of schooling.

Case study schools were often not aware of the range of practical resources that were available to them in the form of toolkits and guides, how they could easily access these resources or which resources might best suit their particular circumstances. Some schools indicated that they would welcome systematic or regular information provision about parental engagement to enable schools to keep up-to-date with the latest developments and resources.



## Conclusion

School – family partnerships are not static; commitment and effort are required to develop and sustain effective partnerships. As the findings from the case studies indicate, strong relationships built on respect, trust and clear communication and strong school leadership promoting an inclusive ethos within the school that values parental engagement are critical components of successful partnerships.

There are many different ways that schools can foster and support parental engagement. The case study schools have created a welcoming environment which has encouraged more parents to become involved in various ways including: by dedicating space within the school grounds as a meeting place for parents or creating a community hub; supporting parents in taking on a leadership role in involving other parents; establishing a community liaison role that includes finding ways to engage hard to reach parents; and offering opportunities to parents for their own personal development and learning.

Through sharing high expectations about learning outcomes for all students and developing an open dialogue about children's learning, schools and families are better able to support students' development and achievements. When parents could see that a school was delivering high quality learning programs and striving for high levels of learning achievement, they were more likely to become engaged.

The whole school community benefits when parental engagement is an integral part of school planning and improvement processes. By working in equal partnership, schools, families and communities are better able to support their children in achieving the best educational outcomes from their schooling years.