



## 'Learning from their stories'

### School case studies in parental engagement



## FINDINGS AND THEMES

A summary of findings, common themes and challenges relating to good practice in parental engagement drawing on case studies from fifteen schools in Low Socio-economic Status (Low SES) communities across Australia.



Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment  
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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 study project. 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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## Introduction

A growing body of evidence shows that building effective partnerships between parents, families and schools to support children's learning leads to better learning outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Schools go about involving parents in a myriad of ways but sometimes the important role that parents have as the first and continuing educators of their children is overlooked or underestimated. As well schools may be uncertain about how best to take action to increase parental engagement. Through sharing how some schools have gone about this and what has worked well, other schools are able to take ideas and inspiration to strengthen family and community partnerships within their school communities.

## Background

The *National Collaboration Project: Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status (SES) Communities* is 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 SES communities as a critical factor for improving student attendance, engagement in learning and learning achievement.

The project was overseen by a national taskforce led by South Australia. Members of the taskforce include representatives from parent, government and non-government organisations in South Australia (SA), Western Australia (WA), Northern Territory (NT), Victoria (Vic) and New South Wales (NSW), and from the Australian Government.

### *The school case study project*

In 2010, the taskforce invited 15 schools from rural, remote and metropolitan locations in SA, WA, NT, Vic and NSW to participate in the case studies project. The purpose of the case study project was to:

- identify good practice in parental engagement in schools in Low SES communities
- advance understanding of what has worked and in what contexts
- inform the development of further resources or 'toolkits' for schools
- document examples of parental engagement for other school communities to consider and draw upon.

### *School selection and data gathering*

Interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers, parents and community groups within each school community. The information collected included:

- demographic and other contextual characteristics of the school and local community
- examples of specific parental engagement strategies and activities
- elements of and critical factors for successful parental engagement
- the interaction with student learning outcomes
- the role and influence of school leadership in strengthening school, family and community partnerships.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris and Goodall, 2007 Harris, A & Goodall, J 2007, *Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter?* Research Report DCSF-RW004, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, University of Warwick, Available <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RW004> <Viewed 27 July 2011>; Henderson and Mapp, 2002 Henderson, A & Mapp, K 2002, *A new wave of evidence The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*, Austin, National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Available <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf> <Viewed 27 July 2011>



## Summary findings from the case studies

All 15 case study schools from different communities and locations have been working with commitment and purpose to strengthen school-family relationships and support parental engagement in their children's learning and schooling. The case studies introduce the school; outline the key strategies and activities in place and the progress and outcomes being experienced. The critical success factors and some of the issues facing each school community in their endeavour to ensure good educational outcomes for their children are highlighted.

Following is a brief summary of all the case studies as an introduction to the discussion in the next section about common themes and good practice in parental engagement. The full case studies are provided in the companion document 'Telling their stories'. The case studies provide a rich source of information and practical ideas.

**Bathurst West Public School** in NSW has made a commitment to valuing home, school and community partnerships. The school is undergoing a process of cultural change to create the conditions needed to improve student's learning and physical, social and emotional development through recognising and valuing the role of parents in their children's learning. The school leadership team, led by a principal with strong community values, is guiding this change. A number of strategies have been set in place, including the appointment of a community liaison officer and supporting parents in their development as parents, resulting in a greater connection between parents and the school. The school now welcomes and involves parents and demonstrates this by its child-centred focus in educational planning and delivery and its modelling of high expectations for all students.

The **Bradshaw Primary School, Irrkerlantye Unit** in the Northern Territory has been actively reaching out to parents in ways that build trust and provide practical help. Since the unit's establishment in a mainstream school environment, the school leadership has been committed to genuinely listening to parents and responding to what they have to say. The appointment of a student support officer has been an important factor in building respectful relationships with parents. The unit is involving parents in their children's learning through incorporating traditional learning and intergenerational learning approaches into some elements of the school's work. This inclusive environment which supports building family engagement has contributed to improving the attendance and learning outcomes of the children attending the unit.

The **Christie Downs Community School** in South Australia believes in getting parents involved right from the start. Reaching out to young parents and their very young children (0 to 4 years) and through the Learning Together program, the school has taken the lead in providing education and community programs that involve and support parents, including parents from other schools in the community. Parents are able to extend their own learning while being actively involved in their children's learning. Having long seen engagement of parents as a key underpinning of the learning program, the school makes use of individualised and small group approaches, creating multiple points of connection for parents, such as the school garden. The school successfully works in collaboration with other agencies to provide families with more personal and holistic support.

**Coolbellup Community School** in Western Australia is building parental engagement as it puts down 'new roots' as a relatively new primary school created by amalgamating several other schools. The school is focusing on empowering key parents and supporting them to run activities and programs and through this to encourage other parents to become involved in their children's learning and in school governance. Parents are invited to take part in learning journeys through classrooms and learning areas and to participate in school organised activities. As well, the school is working to build links with community agencies and relationships with community leaders to enlist their support for the school.



**Dallas Primary School** in Victoria, has found effective ways of engaging families from diverse language and cultural backgrounds into the life of the school. The multicultural education aides play a particularly important role in linking families into their children's learning and the school community. The school encourages whole-family participation in supporting first and second language development. Parent satisfaction with the school is high; they feel that they are welcome and that there is respect for their culture. Parents assist in developing school rules and making other decisions, so that the values and beliefs of the families' cultures are taken into consideration while also meeting the school's needs. The school has created a place where difference is accepted and respected.

**East Waikiki Primary School** in Western Australia has made engaging parents of its Indigenous students, who make up 12% of its student population, a priority focus. Strategies have included establishing an Aboriginal education team as part of the school's leadership structure, adapting the curriculum to include community values, using the meeting place Ngulla Miya as an outdoor learning centre and creating formal structures for parent and community consultation. This has had a positive impact on Indigenous parental engagement, capacity building and student attendance. The school is now widely recognised as an inspirational model for promoting an Indigenous perspective within school communities. The school is planning to translate the success in engaging Indigenous parents to the broader school community.

The **Elizabeth Schools Community Connections Project** in South Australia was established by three schools Catherine McAuley, St Thomas More and St Mary Magdalene's to develop closer links between these schools and their parent communities so that parents can become more confidently involved in their children's learning. The project, governed by its own Board, has brought together funding from a variety of sources, including some from the three schools, to employ a community co-ordinator and provide a range of programs to parents at all three school sites. Through the various activities, parents are connecting with each other and with staff at the schools. The co-ordinator has been proactive in setting up partnerships with other community agencies and local businesses to contribute to the project. The willingness of the three schools to join together to make the project work has been a critical success factor.

**Katoomba North Public School** in New South Wales has worked to establish itself as a community hub, with the aim of 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. Now recognised and valued by the local community as a focal point where parents can meet, the community hub offers a range of activities, including parental capacity building and child centred services and is an access point for other health and support services for families. Through the hub, the school has shared its lead agency role in many parental engagement activities with other community organisations.

**Manyallaluk Homeland School** in the Northern Territory was opened after a campaign by a group of parents to establish the school in their community. The school is integral to the community and an advisory group of parents and community members provide a link between the principal and the wider community. The community places a high value on education and is involved in the life of the school, including decision making about the school. The school uses a reporting system that enables parents to understand their children's learning achievement. Parents take a leadership role in supporting other parents to become involved in their children's learning and in becoming active partners along with the school in their children's education.

**Moe Elizabeth Street Primary School** in Victoria has taken the lead in establishing community partnerships to support families. Working collaboratively with the community, the school has initiated a number of important programs to form the core of its parental engagement strategies, particularly focussing on parents with children in the early years. Through these programs, parents have opportunities to develop stronger links with the school and other community services. Teachers are encouraged to gain an understanding about the issues faced by the local community and to use individual student data to personalise each child's learning. The school-community partnerships have created a firm base from which to gain greater involvement of parents and achieve better outcomes for its students.



**Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College** in South Australia has highlighted the value of cultural diversity in school life and has made multiculturalism one of the foundations for its partnerships program. With students from a variety of cultural backgrounds and a wide range of languages spoken at home, the school has been pro-active in getting to know the families within its school community and to ensure good communication with parents about the school, its expectations of students and about their children's learning. Staging culturally based events, holding groups for parents from common cultural backgrounds, making interpreters available and taking cultural considerations into account in developing school policy are some of the strategies the school has used to involve parents in the school. The school also takes a lead role in making links for parents into the broader community, and in ensuring that community agencies are available to support families when needed.

**St Albans Meadows Primary** in Victoria has developed a shared vision of valuing the role of parents in the delivery of high quality programs for their children. The school has become recognised as a centre for teacher education in the field of parental engagement. Parents are true partners in their children's education, with high aspirations for their children, and their involvement is valued and respected. Teachers welcome parents into the classroom. With around 80% of students speaking English as a second language, the school has created a range of ways in which parents can become actively involved. It has developed a strong school culture of establishing good relationships with parents as co-educators. This is paying off in better student outcomes, attendance and engagement.

**St Brendan's at Lake Munmorah** in New South Wales sees parents as partners in their children's learning and is using a range of strategies to increase the connection with parents. The school has developed what is termed the 'personnel infrastructure' to support and facilitate parent and community engagement. This includes cluster based parent educators who run programs and workshops for parents, school based class parents helping in classrooms, an active Parents and Friends Association and a family liaison officer. With a whole school approach to pastoral care, the school encourages personal approaches to engaging with parents by using phone calls, emails, face to face meetings and informal opportunities to talk with parents, for example in the school car park. Supported by a committed core group of parents and community volunteers, the school has become a central resource for the community.

**Toukley Public School** in New South Wales has been transforming the school culture into one that unites school and family, placing parents and children at the centre of school life. With the strong support of parents already engaged in the school, the commitment of the school leadership and enthusiasm of the teachers, the school's parent centred approach to building school-family relationships has led to more parents engaging in their children's learning. The approach has included promoting high expectations to students and parents and raising awareness and aspirations in relation to tertiary education. Through the community support officer the school is involved in wider community initiatives to make their local community a better place to live.

**Wilcannia Central School** in New South Wales is using every opportunity to encourage the participation of local parents in school activities as role models for their children and for their own growth through vocational education and specialist access courses. The school is an important part of the fabric of the town. School staff, community members and town and business leaders are working together to build the foundations for strong parental engagement. As a result, the school is on the threshold of new ventures and more parents are becoming involved.



## Strengthening parental engagement: common themes from the case study schools

The case studies provide further insights into and understanding about successful parental engagement initiatives and what works well, for whom and in what contexts. Together the case studies reveal a diversity of approaches, strategies and activities that can be used to strengthen effective practice in parental engagement in schooling.

### Impact of school contexts

In selecting the case study schools consideration was given to factors such as geographical location, school size and year level. It was evident from the case studies that other important factors in the school context impacted on the parental engagement initiatives used by the schools. These factors included: changes in school leadership and/or staff; school amalgamations or changed sites; the historical development of the school; and changing community circumstances.

In every school the combination of strategies and outcomes varied and were dependent upon each school's context and circumstances. As a consequence, each case study school is on its own unique journey to foster and strengthen parental engagement in the life of their school community.

### Good practice 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>2</sup> articulates a way forward for strengthening partnerships between families and schools and outlines a set of principles as the basis for establishing and maintaining these partnerships. Seven key dimensions of effective family-school partnerships are highlighted in the Framework (drawing on Joyce Epstein's work<sup>3</sup>). The seven dimensions provide the foundation for developing good practice in parental engagement. They are:

- communicating
- building community and identity
- consultative decision-making
- participating
- connecting learning at home and at school
- recognising the role of the family
- collaborating beyond the school
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The 'Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning' resource, 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 for school communities to use to reflect on and plan action in relation to parental engagement.

<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</sup> Epstein, J 2002, *Six types of involvement: keys to successful partnerships*. Baltimore, MD, National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University, Available [http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/nnp\\_model/school/sixtypes.htm](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/nnp_model/school/sixtypes.htm) <Viewed 27 July 2011>



## Themes from the case studies - effective practice in parental engagement

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 build their school community. 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.

### Developing a school culture that values parental engagement

The importance of demonstrating that parental engagement was a core value of the school was highlighted by a number of the case study schools. A critical part of this process was developing a school culture that supported and valued parental engagement, that listened to and acted on what parents had to say and that recognised the shared responsibility that schools and parents have in their children's education. Some schools described this as adopting a 'parent centred' approach.

Strong commitment from the school leadership team was needed along with taking a long term proactive, planned and supported approach to strengthening parental engagement. Building the capacity of all staff members in gaining an in-depth understanding of the local community and in forming respectful relationships with parents was a key component of developing the school culture.

### Creating a school environment that welcomes parents

Many of the case study schools had focussed effort on creating a welcoming environment for parents, recognising the diversity amongst the parent community and that some parents were not necessarily familiar with or comfortable in a school environment. The friendliness of staff and inviting parents into the school and classrooms throughout the school day were often mentioned as actions that could be taken. Schools found that through developing a welcoming and inclusive environment more parents were becoming involved in and contributing to school life.

### Sharing high expectations about learning outcomes

Case study schools that had made explicit and reinforced the message that the principal and staff were striving to achieve the highest possible standard of learning outcomes for all students in the school found that parental engagement was strengthened. These schools had actively embraced the belief that all their students can succeed. Sharing expectations and aspirations for students in the school, along with high quality teaching and learning programs and establishing clear learning, behaviour and attendance goals, meant that parents and school staff were able to work together more effectively in supporting students. This also enabled parents to understand how their parental role and responsibilities complemented the teaching and learning responsibilities of the school.

Transition points in schooling were identified by several of the case study schools as key periods when additional communication between schools and families was needed to ensure that students were able to take advantage of the full range of education opportunities that were available to them. For example, in the lead up to the transition from primary to secondary school, activities included holding interactive parent information sessions on choosing a secondary school, future career planning, accessing and preparing for scholarships and involving local industries and career support agencies.

### Building the capacity of parents to support their children's learning

Several of the case study schools had taken steps to engage parents by providing parents with the knowledge and skills so that parents felt more confident and better able to assist their children with learning and in navigating the schools' structures. The underlying premise was that parents were interested in and well able to support their children to aspire to and obtain a high standard of learning outcomes.





More frequent parent contacts and interactions with teachers and the school were noted as indicators of the increasing capacity among some parents to engage in and support their children's learning. As a result, parents became partners in the learning process, initiating discussion with school staff about their children's learning achievements and needs and working together in developing further learning goals.

### **Parents encouraging other parents**

A core group of committed parents were identified by some case study schools as vital advocates of parental engagement within the school, providing tangible role models for other parents and family members to become involved. This small nucleus of parents often took on leadership roles, encouraging and supporting other parents and family members to develop the confidence, knowledge and skills to participate in the school, including school governance and decision making processes, and in their children's learning.

As well, this core group of parents was often instrumental in helping the school gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of parental engagement, what was working well and what else the school might seek to achieve.

### **Reaching out through personal contact**

While communicating with parents is a key role identified for all schools, a number of the case study schools noted that communication needed to be more than a newsletter or note sent home with a child if they were to engage with parents more fully. In particular, the importance of reaching out to parents through personal contact was highlighted. These schools took the initiative in establishing ongoing relationships with parents by creating opportunities for regular personal contact with parents.

Successful strategies used included: making regular phone calls to parents to provide information about their child's progress; using the school car park as an informal meeting place between the principal and parents; teaching staff being available in the school ground after school; and/or ensuring the staff member providing community support travelled in the school bus to get to know and talk with parents about school matters as children were collected.

### **Offering opportunities to parents for their own learning and development**

Some case study schools were able to provide opportunities for parents to continue their own education in the school environment, both in classroom and non-classroom situations. As a result parents often became more engaged in the school community and in their children's learning. Through their own engagement in learning parents were also providing role models to their children.

Examples of the learning opportunities made available to parents included: Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Year 12 courses in cultural and language studies; art; horticulture; child development; nutrition; and physical education. As well, some of the case study schools had incorporated community based learning opportunities into the curriculum that were open to both students and their parents. In one school, parents and Year 6 students visited the local TAFE and university campuses together to learn about the courses offered, providing further inspiration to both parents and students to continue their studies.

### **Connecting with parents in the early years**

A number of the case study schools were seeking to connect with families prior to children starting at school. These schools were developing positive relationships with parents by inviting the parents of young children into early learning through play, sometimes in conjunction with the help of a partner agency. Specific programs for parents in parenting skills and how to support their children's literacy and numeracy development at home were also provided.

As a result, parents became familiar with school staff and the language of school, its organisation and its programs, providing a strong foundation for further parental involvement when their children started school. As well, parents formed friendships and networks with other parents.



### **Using school resources effectively to support parental engagement**

By using existing resources in ways that better suited local needs, case study schools had been able to better support parental engagement in their schools. In some instances, a dedicated resource was created, such as a coordinator position and/or a facility, from a flexible reallocation from within the school's core budget.

The role of the coordinator often included liaison and working in collaboration with other community members and agencies as well as reaching out to parents and families. Frequently they brought to the school an in-depth knowledge of and greater access to the local community. The dedicated facility, such as a former classroom or other building on the school ground, often became recognised as a 'hub' or community centre for parents that was the domain of parents, offering programs as well as informal opportunities to connect with the life of the school.

### **Leveraging additional resources from outside the school**

In a number of instances, resources were sourced from outside the school, such as health related programs and access to specialist personnel, which were then made available within the school environment, fostering increased connection with the school. These additional resources were provided through a range of family and community development agencies and other local, state and Commonwealth agencies, including Indigenous organisations, churches and local councils.

While the delivery of these programs was often supported by a myriad of agencies with different goals, those programs that included a specific focus on parents' involvement in their children's schooling and learning were seen to be more successful in engaging parents from the perspective of the case study schools.

### **Enlisting the support of community leaders and members and community organisations**

Many of the case study schools had developed specific strategies to enlist the support of local community leaders and members and community organisations in strengthening parental engagement in the school. This included providing opportunities and encouragement to community members to take up decision making roles in the school community and making available training and mentoring in relation to these roles where needed.

In Indigenous communities, wider family groups were encouraged to become involved in the school and its governance structures, recognising the roles that other family members have in child rearing. With community support and advice from Indigenous reference groups, schools were able to develop strategies for getting to know the Indigenous culture, visit homelands or countries, and include culturally relevant content in the curriculum.

As well, some schools had accessed their own or external funds to employ community members to support the school leadership and teachers in a variety of ways, such as to develop effective links and communication networks with a specific social or cultural group within the local community; or to inform and train staff about cultural protocols; or to provide additional assistance to students. Examples include the employment of a Vietnamese community member as a multicultural aide and the employment of an Indigenous community member as a homework tutor.

Ongoing collaborative arrangements had been developed between a number of the case study schools and local community organisations with the common goal of supporting the education, health and wellbeing of children, parents and families. These partnerships were seen as important both in relation to the practical outcomes that could be achieved for specific families and more generally in increasing community understanding about the value of improving student learning outcomes to future life chances and directions.

## **Some challenges in strengthening 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.



### **Establishing and maintaining a clear and commonly understood framework for parental engagement within the school community**

A significant challenge for some of the case study schools was in building a common understanding amongst school staff, parents and community organisations about what was meant by 'parent or family engagement'. Several of the case study schools noted that strengthening parental engagement required a long term proactive, planned and supported approach with agreed goals developed in partnership with parents.

One of the first steps in achieving a common understanding often involved creating a new culture within the school community that recognised valued and worked at developing strong relationships with parents. It was apparent from the case studies that a clear and commonly shared framework and definition for engagement could inspire school and parent investment, which in turn contributed to school improvement and student success. Some schools found it necessary to challenge deeply embedded views about parental engagement as simply 'helping out' or attending functions and about parents' and local communities' interest in and capacity to collaborate in children's learning.

Strategies for addressing this challenge included schools' demonstrating that they were willing to question the nature of their school culture, and the commitment and drive of school leaders to work with parents. Through ongoing professional development, which included the use of relevant demographic and student achievement data, school staff were able to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse backgrounds of parents and the local community and of the specific needs of students.

### **Empowering parents in their partnerships with schools**

For parents to feel empowered in their partnerships with schools, a number of the case study schools found that it was necessary to work with parents to build their confidence in their own abilities and capacity to engage with schools. This included increasing parents' knowledge and understanding of the structures and 'language' of schools, as well as in how parents' can support their own children's learning.

When teachers and other school staff built a collaborative partnership with parents, recognising their aspirations for their children, parents became willing partners in supporting their children's learning. When parental partnerships were established on the school's terms, rather than as a mutual endeavour, parental involvement and attendance remained an issue. Supporting the development of skills and approaches that foster parental participation in the classroom and other school learning opportunities may be necessary amongst some teachers and other school staff.

Initial approaches to parents in some of the case study schools included listening and responding to parent needs about student learning and building trust through providing information and support to parents as required. As relationships between school staff and parents strengthened, common goals and shared understandings were developed about the students' needs and about how these could best be met.

In developing mutually supportive partnerships between parents and schools, a critical aspect was that each partner's particular strengths in contributing to the partnership were recognised and valued by the other. When specific learning needs were identified, both partners worked together to build the capacity to provide the combined support needed to address these. Supporting improvement in children's learning always remained the key driver of the relationship.

The case studies also indicated that commitment of the school's leadership to building relationships with parents as equal partners provided the ongoing impetus and motivation to make the changes necessary over time to support and strengthen parental engagement within the school community.

### **Sustaining the commitment and continuity of the resources needed to support parental engagement**

While some schools were able to re-allocate their existing resources to support parental engagement or were able to make use of resources from other sources and organisations, many of the case study schools did not have the capacity to access additional financial resources.



Sourcing and maintaining funding to programs and developing and retaining the expertise to facilitate parental engagement strategies and activities were ongoing challenges for many of the case study schools. Funding from other sources was often time limited and difficult to access, requiring substantial submission writing and reporting. Where the resource belonged to an external agency and the school was simply the vehicle for program delivery, this sometimes proved to be problematic for the school, particularly if an expectation developed that the school would take responsibility for ongoing provision of the program in the longer term.

Short term funding arrangements also compounded the difficulty in retaining the expertise in parental engagement within the school that had been developed when more resourcing was available. Maintaining continuity of relationships with parents was more difficult when there was constant staff turnover due to short term contracts or positions were no longer funded. System wide policies for supporting parental engagement and the use of school resources to enable this would provide school leadership with clear direction about the flexibility they have in deploying resources for this purpose.

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

The findings from the case studies add to the understanding and knowledge about the factors that are significant in strengthening parental engagement, as well as some of the challenges that may be encountered in the process of developing successful partnerships between parents and schools.

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 enable parents, families, schools and communities to work together for the benefit of their students. Central to successful partnerships is the school leadership team's role in promoting an inclusive ethos within the school that values parental engagement.

There are many different ways that schools can foster and support parental engagement. 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, are some of the successful ways the case study schools have created a welcoming environment which has encouraged more parents to become involved.

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. Many of the case study schools were assisting parents in understanding how their parental role and responsibilities complemented the teaching and learning responsibilities of the school. They did this 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. 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 by including a focus on parental engagement as an integral part of school planning and improvement processes. By working together in equal partnership, schools, families and communities are better able to support their children in achieving the best educational outcomes from their schooling years.