



## 'Telling their stories'

# School case studies in parental engagement



## CASE STUDIES

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.



Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment  
and Workplace Relations





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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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## Introduction

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 parental engagement project developed and analysed 15 case studies on parental engagement aimed at identifying good practice in parental engagement in schools in Low Socio-economic Status (SES) communities to advance understanding of what has worked well and in what contexts.

The case studies detail the background of the schools studied, their particular challenges and what techniques have worked well and improved parental engagement outcomes. They provide examples of parental engagement for other school communities to consider and draw upon.

## Background

The National Collaboration Project: Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status 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 included 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.

### *School selection*

The Taskforce identified and invited 15 schools to participate in the development of the case studies. Some schools were from rural, remote or very remote areas, but most were in urban metropolitan or regional centres in SA, WA, NT, Vic and NSW.

All schools operated in communities that were identified as Low Socio-economic Status (Low SES) as measured by the Socio-economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) as below the mean of 1,000 or the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) to 700.

To provide a representative mix of different schooling environments, the schools were identified through their engagement activities and/or where parental engagement was a focus in school plans, operation, leadership and culture and then by geographic location, school size, student population (including Indigenous and multicultural) and level of schooling.

### *Data collection*

Each school was visited by a researcher who interviewed the school principal/s and others in the school community. The information collected from each school 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.

## Findings – common themes and challenges

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. A number of common themes emerged from the case studies that 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. As well, three key challenges were identified. A more detailed discussion of the themes and challenges can be found in the companion document 'Learning from their stories'.

<http://smarterschools.gov.au/ParentalEngagement/Pages/ProjectResources.aspx>.

These common themes were:

- Developing a school culture that values parental engagement.
- Creating a school environment that welcomes parents.
- Sharing high expectations about learning outcomes for all students.
- Building the capacity of parents to support their children's learning
- Reaching out through personal contact
- Offering opportunities to parents for their own learning and development
- Connecting with parents in the early years
- Using school resources effectively to support parental engagement
- Leveraging additional resources from outside the school
- Enlisting the support of community leaders and members and community.

The three key challenges were:

- Establishing and maintaining a clear and commonly understood framework for parental engagement
- Empowering parents in their partnerships with schools.
- Sustaining the commitment and continuity of the resources needed to support parental engagement.

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 them to keep up-to-date with the latest developments and resources.

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.

The whole school community benefits when parental engagement is 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.



## List of case studies and 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.

<b>School</b> (enrolment data My School website 2009)	<b>Title and summary</b>
<a href="#">Bathurst West Public School</a> New South Wales Student enrolment 373	<p><b><i>The impact of an inspirational principal</i></b></p> <p>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>
<a href="#">Bradshaw Primary School</a> <b>Irrkerlantye Unit</b> Northern Territory Student enrolment 297 Irrkerlantye Unit enrolment 65	<p><b><i>The power of respectfulness</i></b></p> <p>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>
<a href="#">Christie Downs Primary School</a> South Australia Student enrolment 150	<p><b><i>Getting parents involved right from the start</i></b></p> <p>Parents are able to extend their own learning while being 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>
<a href="#">Coolbellup Community School</a> Western Australia Student enrolment 213	<p><b><i>Putting down new roots</i></b></p> <p>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>
<a href="#">Dallas Primary School</a> Victoria Student enrolment 320	<p><b><i>How to engage culturally diverse parents</i></b></p> <p>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>
<a href="#">East Waikiki Primary School</a> Western Australia Student enrolment 471	<p><b><i>How a focused engagement priority brings success</i></b></p> <p>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>



<p><a href="#">Elizabeth Schools Connections</a> South Australia Catherine McAuley, St Thomas More and St Mary Magdalene's Student enrolment 395, 364, 195</p>	<p><b><i>Three schools, one parental engagement project</i></b> 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><a href="#">Katoomba North Public School</a> New South Wales Student enrolment 155</p>	<p><b><i>The school as community hub</i></b> 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><a href="#">Manyallaluk Homeland School</a> Northern Territory Student enrolment 22</p>	<p><b><i>A community takes the lead</i></b> 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><a href="#">Moe Elizabeth St. Primary School</a> Victoria Student enrolment 130</p>	<p><b><i>A school takes the lead in a community partnership</i></b> 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><a href="#">Our Lady of the Sacred Heart</a> South Australia Student enrolment 633</p>	<p><b><i>An open door on the world</i></b> 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><a href="#">St Albans Meadows Primary School</a> Victoria Student enrolment 353</p>	<p><b><i>The central importance of relationships</i></b> 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><a href="#">St Brendan's Primary School</a> New South Wales Student enrolment 392</p>	<p><b><i>How a school became a Community's central resource</i></b> 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>



<p><a href="#"><u>Toukley Public School</u></a> New South Wales Student enrolment 533</p>	<p><b><i>Putting parents and children at the centre of school life</i></b> 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><a href="#"><u>Wilcannia Central School</u></a> New South Wales Student enrolment 101</p>	<p><b><i>Rebuilding a school, regenerating a town</i></b> 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>



## Case study: Bathurst West Public School

### *The impact of an inspirational principal*

#### Introduction

Bathurst West Public School is a K-6 school with approximately 375 students, located in a fast-growing regional city on the Central Tablelands of New South Wales, about 200km west of Sydney. Central to the school's culture is high expectations of students, and an acknowledgement of parents having the primary role in their children's learning. The principal and staff have made significant progress in building a cohesive school community where parents are equal partners in their children's learning.

#### School context

The school offers both a Special Education Unit and an Opportunity Class. The student population consists of 18% who have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. The diverse school population is drawn from several new housing development areas and a large housing commission estate. Student numbers were declined slightly each year from 2002 but have increased in 2008 and have remained stable for the past two years.

The principal was appointed in 2009 and she has placed a strong emphasis on community values and a philosophy that all children can learn, and that parental involvement with children's learning is the ideal. The principal initiated a review of the school's direction, and consultations with the Parents and Citizens Group was part of the process.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The school's educational approach has changed from making the child fit the school to the school fitting the child. That is, the school makes the necessary adjustments so that it is prepared and willing to acknowledge and build on the skills, abilities, prior learning and experiences of the child.

The school's interest is in not simply embarking on a series of one-off unrelated activities but on a commitment to valuing home, school and community partnerships.

Key strategies include the following:

- The school appointed a community liaison officer to implement parental engagement activities and capacity-building. This officer co-ordinates the school's participation in community events and the community's participation with the school.
- The school has made a point of acknowledging the role of parents as the first and most important teachers of their children, and promotes the ideal of the school's working in partnership with the parents. Parents are welcome in the staff room at any time, and appreciate the symbolism of this as well as the informal contact with teachers.
- Morning teas for parents were started in 2009, where parents could meet school staff and learn about what is happening at the school. The morning tea invitation was the first time parents had been formally and individually invited into the school. The morning teas have been very successful in connecting with parents who have previously not come into the school. There has been a notable increase in participation by fathers and grandparents.
- On the summer afternoons there is another social activity, ice blocks on the terrace, for parents, children and teachers.



- The school makes positive phone calls to parents about their children, and the response has been very favourable. Calls are made not only by teachers but by the principal.
- The school implemented a survey at the beginning of the year asking parents to provide information about their child. This has allowed teachers to refine their teaching programs so they connect better with each student.
- The school's executive is working with the community to continually focus on raising expectations for all students.
- A range of courses and activities has been made available to build the capacity of parents to be active partners in their children's learning. This has included a home reader course offered with child care, and a Reading for the future training program where parents learn how to support their children's reading and writing development. Other capacity-building activities included workshops on reading and maths for parents with children at school and pre-school.
- The school believes that access to quality early childhood programs, together with programs that increase parents' capacity to assist their children's learning, can make a significant difference to children's life chances. The school has entered into a partnership with the Benevolent Society to run a playgroup at the school.
- A partnership has been developed with the early childhood area at Charles Sturt University, through which first-year university students come into school to work with the students. In return, teachers from the school provide lectures at the university.

## Progress/outcomes

Staff and parents reported there had been a significant change in school culture. Parents say they are feeling more comfortable at the school and with the teachers. Teachers are keen to engage with parents. Parents as a result, are much more connected with their children's learning, and more confident in their ability to participate with it.

Parents have responded well to capacity-building opportunities. Workshop numbers vary, but each activity attracts enough parents to make it worthwhile.

Parents and teachers have also observed that students are displaying more confidence, feeling safe, taking risks in learning/reading and showing more enthusiasm. Students now are doing things because they know they can. Parents of students with special needs observe their children writing sentences when they never thought it would happen.

## Critical success factors

The school's significant progress in engaging parents as active partners in their children's learning has happened because:

- a school leadership team that respects the role of parents in their children's learning, has created high expectations and the belief that all children can learn, irrespective of social circumstances, and that engenders a genuinely caring and personal atmosphere
- supportive school staff who share the a school leadership team's vision and commitment
- a changed school culture in which the school fits the child rather than expecting the child to fit the school
- relationships between the school, community and government agencies that support parents with health and welfare issues
- the range of innovative activities designed to build relationships between the school and parents.



## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

One of the biggest issues for the school in its parental engagement efforts is to maintain the momentum created and the implementation of new programs and activities.

There have been significant changes throughout the school. The school leadership recognises that this can be challenging to staff, and is actively working with staff to address issues or concerns that staff may have.

This school, along with most others, has noticed that parental participation in their children's learning declines as children get older. In Kindergarten parents are very interested and want to know about and be involved in their children's learning. Later, as students seek to become more independent they often actively discourage parents' involvement. Work and other commitments for parents may also take priority.

The challenge for this school is to find a way that enables parents to remain engaged in their children's learning. It may be that the centre of engagement shifts more to the home, or that the methods of engagement shift from a physical presence to other forms of communication.

## Conclusion

With the persistence and leadership of the school, and the commitment of the school's staff, the school has made significant progress in a process of cultural change and parental and community capacity-building. This is creating the conditions needed to improve children's learning and physical, social and emotional development.

The school now welcomes parents, involves them in their children's learning and supports their development as parents. Fundamental to the school's efforts is its recognition and valuing of parents' role in their children's learning, its child-centred focus in educational planning and delivery and its modelling of high expectations for all students.

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## Case study: Bradshaw Primary School's Irrkerlantye Unit

### *The power of respectfulness*

#### Introduction

The Irrkerlantye Unit of Bradshaw Primary School in Alice Springs was formed to provide a more formal education for Indigenous children who were being educated at a learning unit at a community arts centre. There are approximately 65 students enrolled in the Irrkerlantye Unit and approximately 295 in total at the Bradshaw Primary School. Many of the parents had been involved in inter-generational learning at the arts centre, and strongly identified with its traditional approach to learning.

The approach of the staff at the new unit has been to rebuild and sustain this involvement. An important step has been to appoint a student support officer to build relationships with families. Another important step has been the introduction of family days each term, where families share a meal and celebrate what their children have been doing at school.

Learning outcomes, attendance and the social skills of the children are all clear evidence of the success of parental engagement at the unit, which now has significantly increased enrolments.

#### School context

The Irrkerlantye Unit was established as an entity within Bradshaw Primary School in 2006, and draws its students from in and around Alice Springs. It started as the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre, offering alternative education mainly for the children of the Arrernte people, as part of the Irrkerlantye Arts Centre. A feature of the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre was that it allowed for inter-generational learning, which involves students working with family members.

In 2006, the Northern Territory Minister of Education, Employment and Training announced that the students at the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre would be moved to units in a local primary and high school, as this would offer improved facilities and lead to better student outcomes. Parents were able to choose Bradshaw Primary School as the site for the new learning unit, however the decision to move caused anxiety amongst some parents at the centre.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The school worked hard to reconnect with students and parents. Some families were particularly concerned that the loss of the learning centre meant the loss of an opportunity for inter-generational learning where families could learn and work together, as is the tradition in many Indigenous communities. The principal listened and was responsive to the parents when setting up the current structures and programs.

Teachers spent many afternoons visiting parents providing information about how the children would benefit from broader and richer educational opportunities. Attendance began to improve as families saw that their children were being looked after and supported. Visits continued to the students' families after school, teachers introducing themselves and explaining what the school could offer which resulted in establishing relationships and continued building trust and confidence between the unit and parents/families.



### ***Student support officer***

A student support officer was employed to continue building the relationships established with families and support student wellbeing. The student support officer goes on the bus that brings students to school each day to continue contact with families. At each child's house, the student support officer connects with the family, even if it is just by waving hello or knocking and calling out that the bus has arrived. Parents often come out to talk to the student support officer and sometimes confide in her about issues that might be preventing the child from attending school. The principal and teachers often travel on the bus and parents are also invited to travel on the bus with their children.

The student support officer's presence each morning reinforces the message that the school cares about the children and wants to support them in their learning. The student support officer also provides follow-up support for the families where necessary. During the day she helps them to make or attend appointments with Congress, an Aboriginal organisation that provides a range of primary health care services to Indigenous people. She also supports families in their dealings with other government agencies. This willingness to support families has strengthened the level of trust.

### ***Family days***

Family days are held each term. Families are invited to the unit to share a meal and to become involved in their children's learning. The school uses these days to showcase students' learning, to reinforce the school's expectations about attendance and learning, and sometimes to explore issues that are a barrier to learning. Teachers said that each student at the unit had one or more family members present at each event.

Not all family days have an educational focus; sometimes they are celebratory. At the end of 2009, the students gave a Christmas concert for their families. At the conclusion of the concert, a senior member of the local community formally thanked school staff for the support they had given their children and for the excellent education their children were receiving. It was a significant moment for the school as this person had been an outspoken critic of the relocation.

The family days have been a huge success, with more than 100 people attending.

### ***Art show***

The art show was organised by the unit as both a fund raising event and an opportunity for family involvement in the school. Artists from the Irkerlantye Arts Centre and others were invited to work with students to develop small art works that could be sold to the wider community. Many artists and families attended the 'painting days' where students and parents painted together. This was a way of bringing back the inter-generational learning that was highly valued by parents in the former learning centre.

### ***Learning the Aboriginal way***

'Learning the Aboriginal way' is important to many families because they want the school to help sustain their culture and language. Families have supported the unit's bush days where students and families go back to their homeland to learn culture and language. Parents would like to build on these beginnings.

## **Progress/outcomes**

From a background where families were angry and distrustful after the learning centre was closed, the unit has made significant progress.

Families generally are now happy to engage with the school and are involved in, and supportive of, their children's learning. There is mutual respect between school staff and families as parents feel their children and



their culture are valued. The principal estimates that about 90% of students' families are engaging with the unit in some way about their children's learning.

In four years, student attendance has improved from approximately 55% to more than 80%. Enrolments have more than doubled and students' learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy have risen substantially.

## Critical success factors

The appointment of a student support officer, who is respectful in her approach with parents, has been an important factor in the continuing success of the engagement work.

Parents and community members spoke warmly of their relationship with her and their respect for her because she helped them. The parents have reciprocated with respect for the school leadership, the teachers and the support staff, whom they believe have made every effort to listen to what they want, and to make a place for them in the decision-making process.

Another factor is that the unit has an Indigenous teacher and two Indigenous assistant teachers, and wherever possible the school employs Indigenous tutors and inclusion support assistants. This strengthens the links with local Indigenous families and parents say they feel more comfortable about being involved at the school.

The energy and commitment of teachers and support staff, and the quality of teaching at the unit are other important factors. Parents comment that their children are learning and are proud of their achievements.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The high degree of mobility amongst some of the local Indigenous population makes it difficult for staff at the unit to keep in regular contact with all parents. Some students move between houses and family members. Parents and other family members may need access to adult literacy programs to support their child in their learning. Getting funding for parental support programs is a continuing challenge because these programs are additional to the school's core work.

## Future plans and conclusion

The Irrkerlantye Unit provides an example of how parental engagement has been achieved through genuinely listening to parents, responding to what they have to say, showing respect for cultural needs, incorporating traditional learning into some elements of the school's work, reaching out to parents in ways that build trust and give practical help. The school is looking for ways to further build capacity among parents. There is increasing support for the school in its work of bridging the attainment gap for its students as other agencies work in partnership. As the school is a respectful partner, there is evidence that it is the inclusive environment that supports building family capacity that is contributing to improving student learning opportunities and outcomes.

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## Case study: Christie Downs Primary School

### *Getting parents involved right from the start*

#### Introduction

Christie Downs Primary School has approximately 150 students and is located south of Adelaide. The school has long seen engagement of parents as a key part of its school philosophy. This case study outlines the need to treat partnership building as an ongoing endeavour.

The philosophy of the school has always been the importance of an inclusive and integrated community. The school has continued to build capacity and networks that enable parents to develop their parenting capacity. While the school has made an important contribution through its many points of welcome and parental engagement, the synergy with other agencies in the community has also been a significant factor in the success of its partnerships work.

#### School context

Christie Downs Primary School is a government-combined primary school and special school. It has had one principal since the amalgamation of what were two separate schools and operates as a single integrated school. Some students with special needs come from several neighbouring suburbs with varying socio-economic profiles. The school has capitalised on the broad nature of its parent community to build overall parental capacity.

Student participation has a high profile. Whole-school assemblies are student-led and include both primary and special students. Class meetings and meetings of the student representative council provide student information for staff and Governing Council meetings.

Parental engagement and support for parenting have been features of the school for many years. The school has gone out of its way to take a lead in education and community programs that involve and support parents, including parents from other schools in the community.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

##### *Multiple points of connection*

The school has created multiple connection points for parents. The idea is that parental needs and connections vary greatly, so an entry point that engages even a small group of parents is valued.

One example is the school garden. The school successfully applied for a kitchen garden grant which was used to grow food for use in regular cooking activities. Some of the parents do gardening; others work in the kitchen areas. A whole class can cook at the same time with parents, students and teachers together.

Another successful practice is to have staff available in the school yard so that parents can come and talk to them about any issues.

##### *Learning Together program*

The Department of Education and Children's Services *Learning Together* program is a significant South Australian family and community support program that connects and engages with families who, in some cases, may not come into the school. This program started in 2002 as a long-term strategy to engage



vulnerable and marginalised families. The program involves parents in their own learning while their children are at playgroup.

A qualified early childhood leader works full time as the manager of this program. Salaries and equipment are provided by the Department of Education and Children's Services. The program is open to all parents, whether their children eventually attend the school or not.

The program is seen as a medium-to-long-term strategy for families. Its outcomes to date have been shown to have a significant effect on parents engaging with their children, and within the school. It runs every school day and provides a range of community-based learning programs for children aged 0-4 years old. Parents are actively involved in literacy programs, using ICT, and have the opportunity to access personal learning through Year 12 attainment study options, offered on site. TAFE now offers Community Studies as part of the *Learning Together* program.

### ***Involving parents and community in the life of the school***

Parents say they are comfortable at the school and confident about being able to raise issues. They feel respected, included and understood. Staff make time to stop and listen to parents.

The school runs a range of special services to help students; speech therapy, a *Learning Assistance Program* that involves parents assisting students on a one-on-one basis; and a gross motor program where students and their parents join in climbing, dancing and balancing. All these involve parents working with teachers and the students.

An *Innovative Community Action Networks* program is run at the school for students with special needs and their families. The program was piloted in this community to bring agencies and organisations together to support young people's learning, their transition through and from school, and to employment. Its focus has recently been extended to facilitate early intervention.

In this more recent program, the needs of children 0-4 years of age are identified; a community worker makes contact with the parents to discuss student's needs and offers to meet them at school or in their home. The aim is to exchange information and help with organising the care and learning needs of their child both before and during their transition to school.

## **Progress/outcomes**

The outcomes of parental engagement strategies used by the school can be seen at the individual level. Building from this more individualised and small group approach has been the key to achievement not just at the individual level but in the parent community more broadly. The *Learning Together* program in particular is helping parents build confidence and become more involved in their children's education from the start.

Parents involved in the program are surveyed annually. In 2008, the survey showed 81% of responding parents rated themselves more confident, 83% stated they were more confident talking to educators and 79% said they understood their children more. In addition, the principal has many anecdotes from parents who have written up *Learning Together* stories as part of the program, describing how it has changed their families' lives for the better.

Another outcome of the project has been that several parents have gone on to study at school or further education. Some parents have gained part-time employment as school support officers.



## Critical success factors

The inclusive philosophy of the school leadership underpins successful parental engagement at this school. It is this philosophy that has led to the outreach approach, where all parents and future parents are made to feel welcome and are included in the programs offered through the school.

By creating multiple points of entry to engage parents, the school has found a range of ways to attract parents. Strong links between the school and local kindergartens, and the willingness to involve all prior-to-school parents, regardless of whether they intend sending their children to the school, have been important in bringing a wide range of parents within the school's orbit. The early intervention approaches, capturing engagement of parents before their children reach preschool appears to be working well, with spinoffs into the school. In the junior grades, for example, there is a cluster of engaged parents, many of whom have come through the *Learning Together* program.

The school makes sure that the connection between a parent's involvement and the child's education is strong and clear. There is a consistently collaborative approach between home and school on education, behaviour management and the child's overall development.

Finally, the school has skilfully harnessed resources and programs from outside the usual sources to fund staff positions devoted to parental engagement and related work.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The school and community agencies working in close harmony are a critical factor in the long-term success of the programs in the school. Ongoing funding is a constant challenge for the Governing Council and school leadership team as many programs require annual renewal, but proven successful outcomes help to ensure continued funding.

It is also difficult to keep parents involved beyond the early years of schooling. During the middle years of primary schooling, there is less parent involvement, often because parents have returned to work. In these years, lack of parental engagement tends to affect student attendance and learning outcomes. The school is continuing to develop strategies at this level of schooling in similar ways to the *Learning Together* program.

## Conclusion

This is a school reaching out to its community and in particular to its current and future parents. It has recognised that without early intervention, the developmental vulnerability of many of its students on school entry will continue to be a major factor impacting their learning. It has also recognised that without increasing the capacity of parents to support the learning and development of their children, developmental vulnerability will be a feature of continuing student intakes.

Accordingly, the school has reached out to parents of children in the 0 to 4 age bracket. In this the school has been supported strongly by additional funding from education and other sources that recognise the benefits of partnerships in tackling family issues more personally and holistically.

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## Case study: Coolbellup Community School

### *Putting down new roots*

#### Introduction

Coolbellup Community School is located in an urban area south east of Fremantle and has approximately 390 students. It provides a case study of how to put down new roots when old schools have been closed, old patterns of parental engagement broken, and where the school community has traditionally not been widely engaged in the life of the school. It is a good example of how parent-school partnerships can develop successfully with co-operative partnerships empowering key parents.

#### School context

Coolbellup Community School is a relatively new primary school created by amalgamating a number of other schools where enrolments were falling, and built on a new site. The principal and many of the staff are new to the area. Students at the school come from diverse cultural backgrounds, economic circumstances and, for many, English is not the first language spoken at home. The school works with three critical groups – the parents, community leaders, and external agencies who provide services to families.

The closing of the old schools disrupted the formal and informal parental engagement, support and networking structures that had been in place at each of those schools, so the process of establishing the new School Council and Parents and Community Group began again.

#### Key parental engagement activities

The partnership-building initiatives come largely from the school and aim to support parental involvement in the school and in the school activities. These activities include supporting parental involvement in their children's learning at home and supporting parental involvement in school governance. They also include developing links with community agencies.

Inclusiveness is a key value. The school goes out of its way to make parents feel welcome, creating social occasions to which parents are invited, introducing programs and opportunities for parents to grow personally, and generally providing a caring environment for parents and their children.

The school promotes transparency, with honest feedback and response to all parent concerns and issues. Parents are considered as much a part of the school as are teachers and students. Many are in the classrooms and around the school throughout the school day.

#### *Early years initiatives*

Many of the initiatives are directed at parents with babies and with children in the early years of schooling:

- *Nursery rhymes.* The school conducts a small weekly gathering focussing on the 0-4 year age group, with emphasis on nursery rhymes and fairy tales and the rhythm of language.
- *Books for babies.* Focusing on new babies and toddlers, all parents are invited into the school to be guests at an assembly to welcome the baby or toddler. They receive a tee-shirt with a catchy message promoting the school and the importance of reading to young children. Each child receives a hard-cover cardboard book.
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- *Kinder linking*. This program links the school-based five year old learning programs more closely with the local community kindergarten, a program for 3-4 year olds. This is an off-site kindergarten for Indigenous children, and assists Indigenous students and their families to more easily make the transition to primary school.
- *Special days*. Parents are invited to special days at the school, when new births are celebrated and connections made with community services.

### **Other family-school links**

The school has become a *Positive parenting* program site, offering courses run by a professional organisation that operates nationally. The response from parents is increasing. The school is also working with the city council on early intervention and family projects.

Parents are invited to take part in learning journeys through classrooms and learning areas. The school has regular email contact with parents and carers. Positive phone calls home are made to parents and carers by teachers, the principal and the deputy principal.

### **Building parental capacity**

Parents are invited to become helpers in classrooms, attend excursions and school-based special days. The school organises *Parents as partners* sessions and promotes them through its newsletter. These focus on such things as how children learn, the importance of diet, nutrition and sleep, and regular school attendance.

Parent education sessions are held. Topics covered include diet and nutrition, and healthy food preparation for recess snacks and lunch boxes, with specialist external personnel brought in to supplement teachers' knowledge and skills.

Parents are included in the new food technology room where cooking and tasting workshops are frequently held. Key parents run these sessions.

### **Involving the wider community**

The school liaises extensively with community agencies. An important part of this liaison work is with the local council in the running of the Community Centre Hub, located on the school's grounds. Through this centre, the school links with council services, including early intervention, play groups, assistance and advice with housing, financial budgeting, and general parenting issues.

The school also hosts meetings to find solutions to issues that arise outside the school gates but which affect the school and its community: for example, skate park supervision, management of anti-social behaviour, provision of support services to community members, and neighbourhood safety.

## **Progress/outcomes**

When a school starts from scratch to build parental engagement, and does so in difficult economic and social circumstances, achievements that may otherwise seem small are, in fact, very significant.

The impact of efforts to engage parents in their children's learning are visible in the smiles that greet people, the respectful relationships, the constructive involvement of many parents in school organised activities, and the number of adults around the school throughout the day. The impact of this on students and parents has clearly been positive.



Staff can see progress being made in greater self-confidence shown by parents when they contact the school. Growth in confidence and relationships translate into greater parental capacity and support for learning.

Other signs of progress can be seen in the increasing number of parents involved in the Parents and Community Group, and the involvement of younger parents in the life of the school.

## Critical success factors

While there are challenges that the school faces in engaging parents, many positive factors exist within the school to help it meet those challenges. These include:

- a consistent and shared commitment among school staff to the ideal of parents as active partners in their children's learning and well-being
- a culture of inclusiveness, transparency and innovation
- strong and caring leadership from the principal and senior staff
- staff cohesion and strong mutual support resulting in relatively stable staffing
- experienced teachers with extensive background in schools in less advantaged areas, and a positive outlook
- the provision of a broad range of programs and activities aimed at building parental engagement
- recognition by staff that progress will be slow
- the ability of the school staff and community to appreciate and celebrate every step forward.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resources

This school continues to build capacity to engage with parents and the wider community. One area of development is the school's preparedness to try to create partnerships with families and community by helping to solve problems that may affect the student's ability to attend or engage at school. These problems can occur outside of school hours and away from the school grounds.

The school is building relationships with community leaders and families to enlist their support and it is looking for ways to co-ordinate responses from other agencies. There are signs of early success.

## Conclusion

The school is working to move to a relationship where parents are provided with the skills, capacity and language to engage in all aspects of their children's learning. There have been some notable successes with individuals and single families, and some important progress on a wider level.

The school's focus is on empowering key parents, building their capacity to run activities and programs. Not only are they engaged in the school and providing role models for their children, they are also providing opportunities for other parents to become involved.

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## Case study: Dallas Primary School

### *How to engage culturally diverse parents*

#### Introduction

Dallas Primary School provides an example of strategies to engage with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The school has an enrolment of approximately 320 students and provides education from kindergarten to Year 6. Many of the families who have arrived at the school over the past few years have come from countries that are experiencing instability and turmoil. As a result, some of the parents and children have been through traumatic experiences which, for many, did not involve engagement with education. The school has found effective ways of reaching out across cultural and language divides to bring these families into the life of the school.

#### School context

Dallas Primary School is located in Melbourne's outer northern suburbs. It has a fast-growing population with a high rate of new migrants settling in the area, many of whom have come to Australia under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program. For about 85% of families, English is not their first language. Among the 18 ethnic groups at the school, the most widely spoken languages are Turkish and Arabic. There is also diversity of nationality and religion: among the Arabic-speaking families there are Shiite and Sunni Muslims, and Christians, and there are large groups of Arabic-speaking families from Lebanon and Iraq.

A high proportion of the school's parents are unemployed and 85% of the families receive the Educational Maintenance Allowance. Approximately 60% of students are funded as English as a Second Language students through Department of Education and Early Childhood Development English as a Second Language funding.

In general, parents place a high value on education and support the school's work, but many do not know how to become fully involved in the education of their children. A key feature of the various ethnic groups in the area is a strong focus on family, with family and cultural celebrations being the main social activities.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

##### ***Multicultural education aides***

The school's starting point was to acknowledge the language, culture and religion of the families and to build a common understanding between home and school about values. One of the key strategies in this effort has been to employ multicultural education aides. The multicultural education aides are employed to support English as a Second Language learners and their families. The aides live in the communities and are trusted by them. They act as a bridge between the school and families, exchange cultural knowledge between families and assist in everyday communications with parents and students, often providing an informal link by gathering at the school gate with parents in the morning to share a coffee and chat.

The multicultural education aides are highly motivated and committed. They feel valued and well-supported, and so are willing to 'go the extra mile' for the families with the view that assisting parents helps assist the child. Their work is helped by the school's two Turkish-speaking and Arabic-speaking teachers who run the school's bilingual program, and by the presence of an Arabic-speaking person in the front office.



## ***Family programs***

The school engages staff to work with students and families in supporting first and second language development. The school encourages whole-family participation – often involving siblings and grandparents – acknowledging that language development is not the province of parents alone. The school has also developed kits for parents that help them to work with their children at home, in their first language.

## ***Kindergarten***

The school council runs a kindergarten for three and four year olds, which provides early learning opportunities for students and a further link between parents in the local community and the school. Parents are encouraged to attend and take part in story-telling. There are 90 children in the program for four year olds, and 40 in the program for three year olds.

## ***Beyond the classroom***

The school takes many steps to reach out to families:

- Sessions showing parents how to support their children to read at home, in both their first and second language.
- A bus is provided to support families in getting their children to school.
- An after-school sports program provides an opportunity to connect families with each other and the school community.
- A weekly newsletter in the parents' first languages provides detailed information about what students are learning and what is happening in classrooms.

## ***Involving parents in decision making***

The school has enlisted the parents' help in developing school rules, so that the rules respect and take into consideration the values and beliefs of the families' cultures while meeting the school's needs.

Decisions about finances, curriculum and school policies also involve input from parents. For instance, parents have had a major role in the design and establishment of the new school that is being built, with Dallas Primary School merging with another local primary school.

## ***Connecting with the wider community***

The school has created a community hub as part of a 'Communities for Children' program in the local area. The hub seeks to strengthen links between families, children, the school and the wider community by running and coordinating programs on the school grounds.

The hub's programs include: a play group, toy library, book bag scheme, formal TAFE-level training in child care and community support, University of the Third Age activities, and a drop-in service where parents can get advice and support. The hub co-ordinator is good at linking parents to government services such as health, welfare and housing, and to non-government organisations.



## Progress/outcomes

There is strong qualitative evidence that the school has succeeded in connecting with parents and getting them engaged in the education of their children. Parent satisfaction with the school is close to the maximum score on the Victorian Department of Education's *Parent opinion survey*, and student attitudes to school, as measured by the *Attitudes to school survey*, are also very high.

Parents say they feel welcome at the school and that their culture is respected, and therefore they are more willing to be involved in the life of the school.

## Critical success factors

Employing local people, especially as multicultural education aides, has been a critical success factor. It has been important too in the success of the community hub, which is run by a local person.

The other big factor is the attitude of the school leadership, who go out of their way to acknowledge the diversity of cultures, to appreciate the work done to bring parents into the school, and allocate resources to keep this work going. The people at the school have created an inclusive and tolerant atmosphere, summed up by one of the aides in these words: *"We come from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds, but there is no racial tension here because we are all working towards a common goal – working for the kids and their parents."*

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The school is looking to have further professional development for teachers to increase their understanding of issues and challenges faced by their students and families and to help them more fully understand the diversity of parents' values, circumstances and responsibilities which influence their lives and choices.

## Conclusion

This school goes well beyond its conventional role and has become a central part of the whole community's life. By connecting school life with community life, it has created a self-reinforcing means of engaging parents and keeping them engaged. At the same time it has enriched the community by creating a place where difference is accepted and respected. In this way it has contributed to the building of social capital in the fast-growing local community.

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## Case study: East Waikiki Primary School

### *How a concentrated engagement priority brings success*

#### Introduction

East Waikiki Primary School has approximately 475 students and serves a primarily residential suburban area south of Perth. East Waikiki Primary School provides an example of parental engagement with one particular group within its school community – its local Indigenous parents whose children represent 12% of the school population.

The school's philosophy on engaging Indigenous parents has led to increased attendance and engagement of their children, and advances in reconciliation. The school has made Indigenous education a priority in school leadership and staffing roles. They have also actively involved Indigenous parents in school decision making.

From the success with the strong engagement of the Indigenous community, the school sees the need to extend this success to parental engagement more broadly, especially to engage working parents, single parents and those who may have not have positive memories of their own schooling.

#### Context

Students at East Waikiki Primary School come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and in many families, both parents work. Indigenous student representation has increased by 2% in recent years. There are also small but increasing numbers of children from Maori and South African backgrounds. The school has earned an excellent reputation and awards for its efforts to engage its Indigenous parents and the local Indigenous community.

The school has been supported by a range of programs. The Australian Government's Getting it Right program has enabled the school to employ two numeracy and literacy specialists, and the school has been selected as a partner school in the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Literacy and Numeracy initiative.

The school has actively engaged Indigenous parents in its Partners in children's learning and well-being program that has contributed to students' increasing success. It is now looking at how to expand this program to engage the wider parent population.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

Key decisions are made in close consultation with the Indigenous community and the school has a number of formal structures through which consultation takes place. The following are examples of strategies the school has developed:

- The school has an Indigenous community group, an Aboriginal education team and an Aboriginal and Islander education officer. The community group is consulted in the development of all school Indigenous plans and activities. In addition they interact with students and staff in a range of cultural activities aimed at supporting school programs.
- The Aboriginal education team was formed as part of the school's leadership structure and is made up of three staff.
- The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme tutor/Parent School Partnership Initiative co-ordinator works with the Indigenous students in years 4 and 6, tutoring in literacy and numeracy and strengthening community relationships.



- The Aboriginal and Islander education officer works across the whole school, providing cultural education and as an Indigenous role model.
- The playgroup/cooking class co-ordinator works with Indigenous students in years 4 to 7, implementing a cooking program and running a playgroup for Indigenous children under five years of age, with their parents.
- In 2005 in consultation with parents, the school decided to embed Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum. The new curriculum was launched at the beginning of 2009 with curriculum workshops being held each term for parents.
- A meeting place, the Ngulla Miya, demonstrates respect for the local traditional owners and is used as an outdoor learning centre. It consists of a fire pit, a walkway highlighting the Indigenous seasons, three mia mia (houses), an interpretative trail, and four totem poles decorated by every person in the school. The meeting place has become the physical hub of the school's Indigenous education program and is a focal point in the school's drive for reconciliation.
- The whole school participated in making and painting the 170 metre long Waakyl or rainbow serpent. Every child, staff member and many community members painted their own section of the rainbow serpent.
- Following a request from the Indigenous Community Group, a whole-school celebration of Indigenous culture was organised with a week of activities paying tribute to local Indigenous story tellers, musicians, dancers and artists. Other activities included a traditional Indigenous games day which gave students an insight into Indigenous culture whilst promoting friendship and fairness. The traditional games have now been incorporated into the school's physical education program.
- Indigenous parent helpers meet regularly in the school's Drop-in Centre to socialise, discuss issues and plan forthcoming cultural events.
- The school provides in-school literacy and numeracy classes for parents. Parents also learn how to use the teaching materials that their children use in the classroom so they can help them at home.
- The school has arranged for parents to take part in the Positive parenting program that aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents in relation to behaviour, emotion and development of their children. This is one way to support developing parental capacity.
- A Breakfast Club operates three mornings a week where parent volunteers work alongside staff to serve a hot, healthy breakfast to students. All students are welcome. Local businesses donate food or provide it at a reduced price.
- In the Reading support program parents and community volunteers are trained to support students with reading difficulties. The school also encourages parental involvement in the Read in bed it's terrific program.
- The school has an 'open door' policy, which means that parents can come to the school at any time and visit their children's classes. Parents who are helping in classrooms are encouraged to bring younger siblings with them.

## Progress/outcomes

As a result of the involvement of Indigenous parents, there is a whole school curriculum focus on Indigenous culture and perspectives. Outcomes from the school's partnership activities are real and measurable, particularly in areas such as attendance.

Positive outcomes that can be linked with some confidence to the school's Indigenous parental engagement strategy include measurable change in other students' attitudes towards Indigenous Australians. In 2006, shortly after the strategy was first implemented, more than 60% of students had a positive attitude, which increased by 10% two years later.

Improvements in school attendance by Indigenous students have also been recorded. An attendance target of 88% was set for Indigenous students. In 2005, just over 50% of Indigenous students reached or exceeded this target. This proportion has increased in each year since and for the past few years has been over 90%.



## Critical success factors

The school has an active commitment to the ideal of shared parental and community responsibility for children's learning and wellbeing. *'The school operating in partnership with the community'* is included as an outcome of the school's operational plan.

The school is committed to working with the local Indigenous community. The resources and programs that have been developed are widely recognised as an inspirational model for other schools to adopt in their drive to promote an Indigenous perspective in their own school community.

Another important factor is the leadership by the principal and the staff who comprise the Aboriginal education team, as well as broader staff commitment and positive, enthusiastic support from the local Indigenous community.

A culture of inclusiveness is embraced by school staff and communicated consistently to students, parents and the wider community.

The school is able to connect families to a broad range of community agencies for support and assistance, and also has contract arrangements with dental and speech pathology services.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The school recognises that it needs to extend the initiatives it has taken with Indigenous parents to the whole parent population. Following feedback from some parents, the school is looking to expand its focus on Indigenous culture to include other cultures represented in the school community.

The school has identified a range of barriers to parental engagement. Working parents often find it difficult to engage in anything during working hours. Non-working single parents are often stretched running households by themselves.

The school believes that the underlying reasons for non-involvement are a lack of awareness of the role of the parent as first educator and the corresponding role parents can play in their children's schooling. The school is working to increase this awareness.

## Conclusion

This case study is an example of a school achieving significant success in engaging Indigenous parents. By building these partnerships the school has improved outcomes for students and helped build the capacity of parents. The school is now planning to replicate this success among the parent community more broadly.

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## Case study: Elizabeth Community Connections Project

### *Three schools, one parental engagement project*

#### Introduction

The Elizabeth Community Connections Project is a joint parent engagement effort by three Catholic primary schools: Catherine McAuley, St Thomas More and St Mary Magdalene's in one parish in the outer northern suburbs of Adelaide. The joint nature of the project has meant the schools have been able to successfully coordinate grants and other funds to provide the project services. The schools enrol students from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the area and current enrolments at the three schools are approximately 395, 365 and 195 respectively. Because of its joint nature, this case study provides an interesting example of how partnerships can be developed in circumstances where it might have been beyond the resources of a single school to do so.

#### School context

While each school had worked hard to foster positive relationships with parents, many parents were not confident about becoming involved in their children's education. Before the joint project began, there had been some parent-teacher liaison about student progress and performance, but this had not been widespread. The reasons for this included that some parents felt they needed more skills to deal comfortably with school expectations, while others had experienced difficulties in their own schooling and so were inclined to keep away from school.

The school leaders decided to make a united effort to connect with parents, and to support building parental capacity and confidence. One of the principals proposed that the three schools establish a *Community connections* project through which they could fund a community development co-ordinator position. The co-ordinator's role was to promote parental involvement in their children's learning, and to support parents to develop closer connections with their children's school. The co-ordinator shares time equally between sites, although the schools contribute different amounts of funding to the position. The project is governed by a board which meets monthly.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

Playgroups were introduced in all three schools in 2009 with the use of volunteer facilitators. The community co-ordinator meets the playgroup leaders regularly to plan programs for each term. Each school has set up a room with tables and chairs, play materials and a lounge so that parents can enjoy playgroup or literacy learning activities with their 3-4 year olds, or meet socially while their children play. Parents participate in hands-on activities and small music and book-reading groups. The success of the playgroup project lies in the way parents have seen how they can help their children learn to read, skills they can now use at home. By using parent volunteers to lead the playgroups, the co-ordinator is building their capacity to become leaders in the programs.

The playgroups also have provided parents the opportunity to connect with each other socially and talk about the things that matter to them.

The schools have introduced workshops where parents can learn about how their children are taught reading, writing and 'everyday' maths, so equipping the parents better to help their children at home. The program has also provided opportunities for parents to be involved in their own learning. There is a creative craft group, a computer course, a food education program and an exercise program.



Other parent education sessions have been offered. These include an early literacy program, a workshop on managing the behaviour of difficult children, and a seven-week *Parent participation and leadership* course, successful completion of which provides a TAFE Certificate 3 in Volunteering. School staff have been involved in delivering these workshops, giving them further opportunities to establish or consolidate relationships with families.

A community health nurse has been involved in a number of parent activities. She provides information about children's health and uses the meetings to develop closer connections with parents. The co-ordinator helps parents get support from other government agencies, and sometimes accompanies them to appointments. She also goes to pick-up points for children in the schools' grounds, where parents can chat informally with her. In at least one school, a school support officer also has been available in the school grounds every morning and afternoon to catch up informally with parents and students.

## Progress/outcomes

The project has provided opportunities for parents to connect with each other and to establish connections with staff at the school. Parents have also created social networks at the workshops and playgroup. This degree of engagement has built confidence, developed skills and generally given parents a stronger connection with their children's school and their community.

The teacher/parent relationship was enriched when teachers were released from the classroom to lead workshops for parents.

The playgroups have provided opportunities for parents to be directly involved in their children's learning. This has been reinforced by the range of parent education programs that have supported parents to have greater knowledge about their children's learning and well being, and helped them to grow personally.

## Critical success factors

There is no doubt that the energetic influence behind this project came initially from one of the principals. However, the willingness of the school leadership at all three schools to work together to establish and sustain the project has been a crucial factor.

Extra funding from a variety of sources has also been important, and is a result of the project being set up in ways that meant it would be eligible for a range of community development grants. This included funding from health and community service budgets.

The project board is not constrained by having to source funding that applies only to education. The local council and Playgroup SA have provided funding to improve existing facilities at each of the schools and to buy equipment, in particular for the playgroups. A grant from the Catholic Church paid for a leadership course for parents. Corporate sponsorship was used to support the 'healthy lifestyle' program. In addition, funding from state government agencies and the State Government Insurance Commission support a number of other project initiatives.

The skills and personality of the community development co-ordinator have been important factors in the success of the project. Her qualifications in community leadership have proved invaluable. She is recognised widely in her role as a great community facilitator and has developed a high profile at all school sites. Parents are known to her by name and are made to feel welcome and comfortable in the school environment.

The staff have also worked hard to build on relationships with parents and to encourage parents to have an active role in their children's learning.



## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

As parents' confidence and skills develop, it is anticipated that they will be able to continue running the project's activities without the co-ordinator. However, the community development co-ordinator position has been full time and the long-term sustainability of the position is an issue as the co-ordinator spends a considerable amount of her own time on project work.

Ensuring there are sufficient funds to maintain the co-ordinator's position and run the range of programs remains a constant challenge. Funding for the position of co-ordinator is reliant upon the three schools continuing to contribute to the project as this is the only funding source for the position.

Some of the parent initiatives are being reviewed to ensure continuing relevance, suitability, presentation and promotion. Other factors such as the hours at which they are held, and parents' transport needs are also being considered to increase opportunities for parents to attend.

## Conclusion

This project has brought about stronger relationships between parents and the three schools, and generated improved services and venues for parents and younger children. The appointment of a co-ordinator has been instrumental to the project's success. The co-ordinator has gently and patiently worked with individual and small groups of parents as well as being proactive in contacting agencies and businesses to improve parental engagement. The willingness of the schools to join together to make the project work gave it the critical mass needed to start with, and its design has enabled it to leverage funding from a wider range of sources contributing to its success.

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## Case study: Katoomba North Public School

### *The school as community hub*

#### Introduction

Katoomba North Public School, situated in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, has long been involved in initiatives to develop a sense of community in its area. As a result, it is an established community hub, recognised and valued in the local community as a focal point where parents can meet. The school has an activity centre that offers a range of capacity building and child centred services and an access point for a range of support and outreach programs and services.

#### School context

Katoomba North Public School is a K-6 school and caters for 155 students, of which 15% are Indigenous. The suburb is physically separated from the main service and shopping centre of the town and there is also a shortage of local services and facilities.

In 2003 the principal initiated discussions with the South West Area Health Service, the Blue Mountains City Council and Kindergarten Union Services about establishing the school as a community centre.

The aim for the school was to build the capacity of parents and the community so that both could become partners in supporting the learning and social development of students at the school.

A Community Room was established and a community-based organisation called Connect Child and Family Services Inc. (Connect) was engaged to co-ordinate services and activities there.

The Community Room developed into a community hub, providing a drop-in place for parents, a meeting space for community groups, and facilities to run a range of activities and programs. The hub provides information on a wide range of health, welfare, early childhood and adult education services and can put people in touch with these services if necessary.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The school has a broad range of parental engagement activities that are provided as part of the school program or held in the community hub. The focus for parental engagement has been on parental and community capacity building to support children's learning and social and personal development.

The Community Room is a separate building in the school grounds. It runs many activities for parents, community members and students, including:

- Play and Chat playgroup sessions, which aim to improve young children's development by increasing community connectedness and strengthening the service system that supports the wellbeing of families with young children
- music lessons for preschoolers, community garden activities, and parent art and craft sessions
- TAFE courses – gardening, teacher aide training, budgeting
- parent information sessions run by teachers – Positive Behaviour for Learning, How Children Learn to Read, Numeracy K-6, Internet Web-Based Technology
- playgroups through which children and their families have the opportunity to experience the school environment gradually before starting Kindergarten



- a homework centre, which is an activity of the Leura Uniting Church and provides homework support for school children in Years 3-6 one or two afternoons each school week, using volunteers.

The school provides training for parents to enable them to support their children at home and school. Parents and caregivers have participated in teachers' aide training delivered by TAFE to enable them to support teachers in the classroom. There are also opportunities for parents to undertake learning in a diverse range of areas such as gardening, parenting, computer skills, financial management, healthy cooking and photography.

The school has an 'open classroom' policy, with parents welcomed and encouraged to visit classrooms to observe or to assist in classroom activities. Parents often take younger siblings into classrooms with them. Parents are also encouraged to participate in all activities at the school.

## Progress/outcomes

The school, through its Community Room initiative, has been successful in developing a greater sense of engagement and support among many parents and the local community. It has also been successful in establishing itself as a community centre.

The teachers' aide training, the *Play and Chat* sessions and the playgroups appear to have led to greater parental participation in their children's learning.

The range of other activities and services provided through the Community Room have supported parents and contributed to the personal growth of those who have participated.

The Community Room has helped create a sense of community and developed partnerships between families, the school and the community. There has been increased participation in prior-to-school programs, children are more familiar with school when starting, and children with special needs are able to be identified earlier.

## Critical success factors

Several factors have allowed the school to take on this large amount of work.

Funding for setting up the Community Room and the involvement of other agencies has been appreciated by the community. The appointment of a full-time Community Room co-ordinator has given the project stability and continuity of effort.

School leadership has been consistent in the development of the 'school as a community centre' concept. The school community liaison officer has played a key role in linking parents and the community to the Community Room and its activities.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

While some parents are strongly engaged in supporting learning, the situation more broadly across the school is one of parental involvement in the school rather than engagement in support of children's learning.

The challenge for the school is to harness the parental capacity and the sense of community and support that has developed, redirecting it to children's learning more broadly. To do this, the school leadership recognises the need to support more parents in their role as the first educator.



As the operation of the Community Room has evolved with a dedicated co-ordinator, the school has shared its role as lead agency in many parental engagement activities with other community organisations. This has been a very positive arrangement.

## Conclusion

The Community Room initiative has led to a diverse range of programs and learning opportunities being delivered to parents and the community. It has also led to the school being recognised as a community centre.

The Community Room is a major contributor to building parental and community capacity and developing a sense of community, which can be harnessed to support children's learning and development.

The infrastructure exists for the development of full partnerships between the school, families and the community in children's learning and development.

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## Case study: Manyallaluk Homeland School

### *A community takes the lead*

#### Introduction

Manyallaluk is a small school located in an Indigenous homeland community about 100 kilometres from Katherine in the Northern Territory. There are approximately 20 students enrolled at the school. This case study shows how a school can successfully capitalise on the initiative of a whole community to help an existing appreciation of education flourish. The local Indigenous community lobbied to have the school established, and there is a nucleus of key local people who continue to lead the educational endeavour. The school is integral to community life and its achievements take pride of place in the community. The school's ethos, clearly owned by its parents, permeates the relationships and behaviours of all.

#### School context

The Manyallaluk community is located on a 3,000 square kilometre property that was once a cattle station. It is home to approximately 130 Indigenous people from three main language groups. The community has a thriving tourism business. Community facilities include a health clinic, women's centre, store and airstrip.

Some of the community who attended primary school in the neighbouring community and who see themselves as having benefitted from it initiated the campaign to establish a school at Manyallaluk. With the support of the community, a small group of women approached their local member of Parliament and then wrote to the Minister for Education.

In response in 2004, a room in one of community's administration buildings was made available to set up the school, and the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training allocated a teacher. Schools in neighbouring communities provided chairs, desks and books. For two years the school operated from this room. However, the community felt that learning conditions were far from ideal.

The principal of the Katherine Group School, with the community's support, lobbied successfully for a new school to be built. Community meetings were held where the parents were able to have a say in the design, colour and location. The new school was opened in 2006.

The community's campaign to have a school built and the willingness of the Department of Education and Training to engage them in the process laid a foundation for the strong level of parental involvement in the school. The key role Indigenous people played in the design and location of the school has developed a strong sense of ownership. As one Indigenous woman who was a key player in having the school established said, "When you do all the choosing, you feel like it's your school."

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The key engagement strategy of the school is to provide genuine opportunities for the Indigenous community to have a central role in decision-making.

An advisory group of parents and members of the community was established to act as a decision making body and a link between the principal and the wider community. At one meeting, members of the advisory group discussed the need to ensure that children whose parents could not read had the chance to have their reading heard, so the group organised adults in the community who could read to listen to other children's reading.



Another issue concerned 'sorry days' when children were absent for several days when there was a funeral. The community decided that not all children needed to be absent for all the funerals and that they should, if possible, only be absent for a day.

The school has also provided opportunities for parents to re-engage with their own education. In 2008, the teaching principal established a night school where, once a week for five weeks, parents were invited to the school to participate in learning programs. This initiative has been followed up with a twilight school where the students act as teachers, demonstrating to their parents what they are learning.

To improve students' literacy skills and to engage parents, literacy backpacks were introduced to the community. Every student received a literacy backpack containing age-appropriate books, as well as newspapers and magazines to take home for the family to read.

A group of Indigenous parents and community members have committed to participating in a focus group and home reading program, which has supported the teaching principal to build strong relationships and to further understand the local culture. The school also has one assistant Indigenous teacher and is supporting another Indigenous woman to qualify as an assistant teacher.

The school has implemented strategies that reach out to engage the community. The school library is available for community use, the teaching principal is available when parents need support to fill in forms, write letters or translate documents.

The school has a reporting system to help parents understand their children's levels of achievement. The reports are more visual than previous reports, so they are more accessible to those parents with limited literacy skills.

## Progress/outcomes

There has been considerable success achieved by the school over the past couple of years. Attendance rates have increased by 27% along with a significant decrease of 48% in parent condoned absences.

Available data on student learning outcomes indicates that the partnership approach at Manyallaluk has contributed to growth in student learning.

The twilight school program has also strengthened parent and community engagement with the school.

Parents and the community expect to be involved in the life of the school, and parents are willing to take a leadership role in supporting other parents to develop the knowledge and skills to be more involved in their children's learning.

## Critical success factors

The biggest factors were the community's own determination to have a school and placing a high value on education. This has been nurtured by successive principals, who have respected the community's ownership of this educational endeavour, and have ensured there are structures in place such as the advisory group to make this real.

The teaching principal works continuously to foster a strong relationship with the community, based on understanding and respect. She also has developed an approach in her discussions with Indigenous parents that allows them to take ownership of the decisions.



The small but significant group of parents who campaigned for the school and who continue to provide leadership has been invaluable in forging links between the school, parents and the wider Indigenous community. Placing these parents at the head of school decision making has been a key initiative.

The provision of high quality teaching and learning is also a key factor. Indigenous parents have acknowledged the good teaching and learning they see here. Many parents spoke of how they liked the school “because our kids are learning” and “the teachers speak softly to our kids”. Allied to this has been the importance of employing Indigenous staff.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

While there has been considerable success, engaging all parents presents a number of challenges, including building the capacity, and confidence with parents in supporting their children’s learning and becoming active partners in their education. There is a willingness to address this by community members. One Indigenous parent said, “the young mothers are very keen. One girl said to me, if they have a program like that I will be the first one there. I want to read”.

There is funding available for the adult literacy programs and the principal has ensured that funding is secured for the continuation of the night school for parents.

The challenge of appointing staff in a remote area needs to be addressed, and those who have the capacity to implement the programs will be appointed. The high turnover of staff in remote schools also makes sustained parent engagement difficult. Manyallaluk has had four teaching principals since the school opened in 2004.

## Future plans and conclusion

Manyallaluk Homeland School is a case study in parental and community engagement from the ground up. The establishment of the school was initiated by the community and parents from the initiating group remain firmly involved in decision making. The school is integral to the ethos and success of the community and is reciprocal in providing opportunities for community members to achieve.

This is a model of how community consultation can lead to major educational commitment and change.

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## Case study: Moe, Elizabeth Street Primary School

### *A school takes the lead in a community partnership*

#### Introduction

The Elizabeth Street Primary School Victoria has approximately 300 students and is an example of a school at the leading edge of community partnership in parental engagement. The school has recruited and allocated resources, carefully structured its culture and focus and ensured it has professional programs to fully develop its students. Its strong focus on data analysis for each student enabled the school to tailor and refine its program and work with parents to ensure high levels of success.

The school also partnered with community agencies to increase community capacity to support families. A focus on early years literacy has meant children come to school better prepared to continue their engagement with learning. By listening and responding to parents' needs, the school has helped empower parents and equip them to become more involved in their children's education.

#### School context

Elizabeth Street Primary School is located in Moe, a regional town approximately 130 kilometres south east of Melbourne. The school opened in 1956 with approximately 400 students. As a result of changing demographics, student numbers declined until 2005, but in recent years enrolments have steadily increased.

The school is rated as having a very low socio-economic profile and 85% of parents receive the Educational Maintenance Allowance. Some 20% of the students speak English as a Second Language and 10% are Aboriginal (Koorie) students.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The school has worked collaboratively with the community on a number of important programs that form the core of its parental engagement strategies. These programs particularly focus on parents and families of students in the early years.

In response to data that indicated children within the community had low language and literacy levels the school initiated the Moe Heights Literacy Project. Working in partnership with a local speech pathologist, and a range of government, non-government and community services this program seeks to deliver a co-ordinated approach to building students' early language and literacy skills.

The project recognises that language and literacy development can be enhanced by working collaboratively and strategically with local services.

*Good Beginnings Latrobe*, a local charity group, was contracted to employ a project officer to implement the project. Initially a key task was to enlist the support of local stakeholders. A working group was established to assist in the design and delivery of the project. This group included representatives from the school, Moe Neighbourhood House, the Maternal Child and Health Nurse Service, the Moe Heights Preschool, a children's speech pathologist, The Smith Family, and the Latrobe City Council.

The project provides opportunities for parents to develop stronger links with the school and other community services. It seeks to break down social isolation by providing opportunities for parents and children in the neighbourhood to meet and socialise. Programs are developed in response to parents' needs and are delivered at the school and a range of other community venues.



Moe Heights Literacy Project activities include:

*Sing and play* is a facilitated playgroup for children aged zero to five years. The playgroup is conducted at the school and children are referred by teachers, preschool teachers and the maternal child and health nurse. The group encourages parent-child interaction to foster children's language and literacy development. Parents can observe or participate in a variety of play activities with their children. The facilitators are available to give advice to parents if asked and provide information sessions on such topics as breast-feeding, nutrition, managing toddlers, toilet training and the importance of establishing routines for babies and young children.

*Ready for school* is a program that was designed specifically to prepare children for school. Located at Elizabeth Street Primary School, it is a more structured program that is held once a week for two terms. The program fosters the development of children's oral language and communication skills, pre-reading and writing skills, fine and gross motor skills and their social and emotional maturity.

While the focus of the program is on enhancing school readiness it also provides parents with guidance on how to become involved in their children's learning. A central part of the program is a take-home book activity, which is designed to increase parents' confidence and skills in supporting their children's literacy development. This program is supported by the local council librarian and parents are provided with opportunities to visit local libraries. Practical information such as how to enrol and prepare healthy school lunches for children is also offered, along with Brain Gym activities. Parents are given a CD to use at home with their children to further extend cognitive development.

*Talking time* is a program to help students improve their oral language skills. School data had shown 70% of students had very low oral language skills, proficiency in which is a necessary precursor for successful literacy development. Every student is involved in 15-minute oral language sessions three times a week. Students are grouped according to their language levels and oral literacy needs.

*Let's talk* is a program developed for parents and consists of two-hour workshop sessions for parents of children aged two to six years. This program also shows parents how they help their children at home by talking, playing, singing and reading with them.

A school welfare officer was appointed to liaise with parents. He follows up on attendance and punctuality and works with parents on any issues that are affecting a student's school work.

A Koorie engagement support officer and a Koorie literacy specialist support Koorie student outcomes and strengthen connections between parents and the school. There are individual learning plans developed in consultation with teachers, students and parents for all Koorie students. The Koorie engagement support officer and Koorie literacy specialist invite parents in for a 'cuppa and a yarn' each term.

Other parent engagement strategies used by the school include the use of individual student data to personalise each child's learning. This approach has led to parents saying that the school understands the needs of their child. Teachers make a point of contacting parents by phone to tell them about their children's achievements, rather than contacting them only when there is a problem.

The school is undergoing extensive renovations which include the expansion of the school library so it can be used by the community as whole. The principal is negotiating with the Latrobe City Council Library to see if they can provide a lending service for parents through the school library.

At the beginning of the school year, a barbecue is held for parents to meet teachers. Classrooms are opened so parents can see the proposed program for the year. The school year also finishes with a barbecue and a student concert. These barbecues are very successful, with about 75% of parents attending.



## Progress/outcomes

Results from the 2009 parent opinion survey indicate very high levels of satisfaction with the school, and showed a marked increase in satisfaction over the three years 2007-2009.

The outcomes of the activities in the Moe Heights Literacy Project indicate not only increased levels of parental involvement in their children's learning development but also development of their confidence and skills in supporting their children's learning.

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in enrolments at the school which school staff attribute to the success of the increased and more positive profile the school has in the local community, due to its many parent engagement initiatives.

## Critical success factors

The willingness of the school to engage with other agencies and organisations has underpinned the successful engagement of parents.

The initiative and drive of school educators to work with others to design and deliver the Moe Heights Literacy Project has been crucial.

The school is linking with early childhood programs developed in the project so that the relationships with parents can be strengthened as students enter primary school.

The principal has nurtured a culture of action where 'the things that matter' in relationships are modelled and encouraged. Teachers are encouraged to think about the issues faced by families and the importance of mutual respect in their dealing with them. This has made teachers more willing to open up their work and involve the school community.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

Some parents lack the confidence and skills to support their children's learning, sometimes due to their own experience, sometimes health and well-being issues. Many parents are unable to attend activities because they lack transport. When the school provides transport, activities are usually better attended.

The short-term nature of some of the funding for the parental engagement initiatives has the potential to affect sustainability. There is no guarantee that funding will continue for the Moe Heights Literacy Project.

## Conclusion

Elizabeth Street Primary School has taken both the initiative and the lead in engaging its parents in the education of their children. It has also taken a lead role in the community, working with other organisations to identify needs, provide programs, and garner additional resources to support early contact with parents.

The level of partnership with the community indicates a school on top of the issues associated with community capacity-building. The school has created a firm base from which to build better outcomes for its students.

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## Case study: Our Lady of the Sacred Heart

### *An open door on the world*

#### Introduction

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College (OLSH) is a Catholic secondary college for girls in Adelaide with approximately 630 students. The school enrolls students from across Adelaide and from 45 different cultural backgrounds. Some students are recent refugees. Part of the school's mission is to celebrate multiculturalism, counter racism and foster an appreciation of peoples from all over the world. Multiculturalism is one of the foundations of its partnerships program.

#### School context

There are three main language groups among the school community – English, Vietnamese and Persian. Due to the significant number of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds there is a wide range of languages spoken and just over half the students speak English as a first language. The school has responded to this by creating English as a Second Language classes for those who need extra help with English and tailors programs to the needs of individual students.

Staff members have developed skills to ensure they can communicate clearly with students and parents, and follow up any perceived misunderstanding. Additional staff members are employed to meet the specific needs of students where language support is identified.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The school works pro-actively to get to know the families within its school community, and to be aware of any parental and family situations. OLSH ensures that invitations to school events and activities are accessible to all parents. Strategies and activities to engage parents include the following examples:

- Culturally based events have been organised, such as a multicultural night, a Chicago fair, and singing, dancing and speaking concerts or presentations. An African choir performed at a human rights showcase, and African students from years 8 to 10 sang at a multicultural education event and also for the local council. An evening music and food event, called 'The World at Our Doorstep', was a huge success, with many of the stalls staffed by parents.
- Interpreters are provided for parent/teacher interviews, and Year 12 information nights. Documents are translated where necessary, and the school newsletter is translated into a variety of languages.
- The school stays in regular touch with families. If a student is absent unexpectedly and without explanation, the school phones home to see if everything is all right. If there is a problem, the school follows up with support.
- The school goes out of its way to incorporate various cultural needs. The school policy ensures that all students can go on excursions. The school provides Halal meat and vegetarian meals at camps or multicultural celebrations, and scarves are included as part of the uniform.
- The school also looks for ways to support parents directly. For example, a Vietnamese parents' meeting was held with Vietnamese community officers on 'How to avoid difficulties in bringing up adolescents'. Parents who attended said they appreciated the chance to share 'adolescent stories' with other parents.
- To help build networks of support among parents, the school has organised cultural family evenings. Parents have enjoyed these evenings and they have been made a permanent feature of school life.



- Activities that offer life skills are provided through community contacts. Examples include leadership programs, driver education, and a swimming program incorporating a first-aid course.
- The school liaises with community agencies, including church groups, the local council, library and shopping centres, child protection agencies, police and multicultural agencies to help students and their families to feel supported in the broader community.
- Refugee organisations and an organisation working with students who show signs of trauma have been important in assisting students and their families.

## Progress/outcomes

The care taken to include people from all backgrounds has led to a sense of unity among parents, students and teachers. This has enabled parents to feel part of their children's education and help them deal with issues that arise as their children grow. It has also supported the students to maintain connection to their family and their culture while gaining an education and connecting with the broader community. It has allowed parent networks and links to support agencies to grow, giving parents extra resources and assistance.

## Critical success factors

Many factors have contributed to successful parental engagement at OLSH:

- The welcoming nature of the staff in fostering an atmosphere of inclusion, personal care and deep consideration
- Appreciation by staff of the value of informal conversations and interacting with parents
- Proactive action by staff to communicate with parents and respond to issues they raise
- Personalised staff relations with students and their parents, based on sound knowledge of their cultures
- Special facilities and actions by the school to ensure that financial, cultural or language issues do not stand in the way of inclusion in any school event, activity, course or offering
- Active celebrations of cultures and acknowledgement of the value of cultural diversity in school life
- Changes to pedagogy in the light of parental feedback to ensure that it is culturally appropriate
- Good communication in the languages with which most parents are most comfortable
- Ready access to support services, including for people experiencing trauma

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resources

Challenges for students occur when, because of language or cultural understandings, parents do not fully understand school expectations. Translation helps, and the staff make efforts to ensure that communication with parents will be fully understood.

One factor concerning sustainability and resourcing is that because it is often the school that makes referrals or contact with agencies for welfare or health reasons, families and agencies have become reliant on the school being the coordinating agency between several services.

## Conclusion

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College is an example of how a secondary school can succeed in engaging parents in a diverse multicultural community where language can be a barrier and where there can be a need for support for the whole family.



Word-of-mouth testimonials have brought new families into the school, where the integration of all student cultures is a special feature. Parent engagement is strengthened when parents from the same culture meet together to build networks of support and participate in the school's special events.

Teachers at OLSH spend time explaining educational terminology, processes and expectations to parents, which is empowering for students and parents. Efforts to encourage parent participation for social well being, family celebration and new knowledge are extensive.

In the broader connections of parents with their communities, OLSH offers a widening horizon of access, support, expectation and opportunity for its students and their parents.

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## Case study: St Albans Meadows Primary School

### *The central importance of relationships*

#### Introduction

This case study highlights how a school can succeed in engaging first and second generation migrant parents in their children's learning. It illustrates that relationships between school staff and families, as well as special programs and community-friendly facilities, can make a significant difference for the students at the school.

St Albans Meadows Primary School is in the City of Brimbank, about 15 kilometres west of the Melbourne CBD and has approximately 360 students. The school was established in 1980 to serve new housing estates. A significant increase of 160 students has occurred since the school implemented its current approach to parent engagement several years ago.

At St Alban's Meadows parents are true partners in their children's education. The school assesses each student's learning needs and tailors programs to meet these needs. Parents are involved in ongoing discussions about their child's programs, learning goals and progress. They are also involved informally in a variety of activities that support the development of their own parenting skills and their children's learning.

#### School context

Not only have the schools' enrolments grown significantly since it embarked on its current approach but it is now generally recognised as a centre for teacher education in the field of parental engagement. This, in turn, has strengthened parent confidence in the school's capacity to teach and care for their children.

About 80% of students speak English as a Second Language. Students have Asian, Sudanese and Eastern European backgrounds. One third of students have a Vietnamese background.

Parents place a high value on education and have high aspirations for their children. Parents also support the aspiration of many students to go to university. Many parents of students with special needs choose the school because of the reputation of its educational and wellbeing programs.

The school has plans to develop facilities that can offer extended services to their families and the community. Funding has been provided for the development of a gymnasium, an auditorium, a multi-purpose room, a kitchen and office space that will provide venues for school programs and family and community activities. The school also has plans to develop a community library that will provide books in English and other languages for students and their families, and a cafe where families can meet. Local health and council services will be invited to share the office space. Once completed, it is likely to become a much-needed hub for the community.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The principal emphasised the central importance of building relationships: "Programs don't solve problems. They can be part of the solution but it's people and relationships that make the difference".

A key message the school conveys to parents is that it feels privileged to be entrusted with the education of their children, and highly values the parents' role and contribution.

The principal has spent many years building the understandings, skills and expertise of staff to develop stronger parental involvement in the school. The whole school has developed a shared vision of valuing the



role of parents in the delivery of high quality programs for children. When recruiting staff, the principal looks for people who will share the school's ethos. As a result, there is a strong sense of shared values and goals among staff. Their passion for offering good teaching and their genuine commitment to including parents in the life of the school is evident.

When parents come to enrol their children the principal emphasises the friendly and approachability nature of the school. He stresses that parents are welcome at all times and don't need an appointment. They should feel free to walk around, to enter the staffroom and to approach teachers before or after classes.

The teachers welcome parents into their classrooms and are comfortable with a high level of parental presence. Out of class, teachers enjoy good relationships with parents, chatting informally with them.

Underpinning the success of parent engagement and all activities at the school is the provision of 'second-to-none teaching and learning'. Three factors have been crucial to this success:

1. The school's commitment to teachers' professional learning. This includes giving teachers time to develop their skills, encouraging them to become instructional leaders, giving them opportunities for peer observation and peer coaching. In recent years the school has become a recognised leader in the teaching of information and computer technology, both within Victoria and interstate. Parents see this and are proud of the teachers and the school.
2. The use of data to personalise learning for individual students. Student learning is assessed and closely monitored. These results are used, to design programs in collaboration with parents to meet each child's specific learning needs.
3. Displaying student work. This gives parents a good idea of what goes on at school in a way that helps overcome language barriers. With the introduction of laptop computers for every child in years 4 to 6, students have made films about what they do at school which are shown at parent information evenings. Students have also developed 'ePortfolios' which contain samples of their work. The portfolios are published on the student laptops, so parents can see their children's school work at home.

Teachers also use student tasks that involve parents in learning. For example, projects in which students have to interview parents or family members and numeracy tasks where many of the parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds are more able to help their children.

Teachers of the early years children deliver *Parents as Helpers* programs, to show parents how they can support their children's learning. They also show how parents can help with their children's literacy and numeracy development.

## Progress/outcomes

The school is delivering excellent outcomes for their students who are performing well above their counterparts in similar schools and, in some areas, above their counterparts across the state and nation. Attendance records and student attitude surveys indicate that students are strongly engaged.

Given the positive responses by parents to the school and its programs, it is clear that strong parental engagement has contributed to these outcomes. Excellent results from the annual parent opinion survey reflect a high level of parental engagement and a positive attitude about the school.



## Critical success factors

The principal believes the key to successful parental engagement is respect. He maintains that all parents should be valued and respected. The values he models in his daily interactions with parents are shared by teachers. Parents feel welcomed and valued and are confident in their interactions with the school.

The school leadership has developed a culture that fosters parental engagement. The principal encourages trying out new ideas. It is this culture that encouraged a parent to organise 'Australia's Biggest Morning Tea' at the school, an event that had previously been organised by staff.

It is also this culture that encourages staff to try new things such as a choir, students' dance groups and 'early bird' reading programs. These enhance student wellbeing and engagement with school and reinforce parents' beliefs that the school is offering their children a rich and varied education in a safe environment.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

A number of issues make it challenging for parents at this school to be strongly involved in their children's learning. Parents who have limited fluency in English can find it difficult to support their children's learning and to fully engage with school activities. The school has tried to help by using visual formats to showcase students' learning and by developing learning and extracurricular activities that do not require fluency in English.

Many parents have come from overseas backgrounds and experienced significant trauma. Many have had limited educational opportunities and lack confidence in approaching the school and supporting their children's learning. The school has responded by offering a variety of activities and events that encourage parental involvement.

Some parents are shift workers which affects their capacity to be available for school activities. The school holds events at varying times during the school day and evening to support their attendance.

## Future plans and conclusion

St Alban's Meadows Primary School provides an outstanding case study of school performance. Its strong and holistic efforts to provide high quality education for its children are paying off in student outcomes, attendance and engagement.

Parental involvement is at the centre of the school culture. The school has recognised and capitalised on parents' high aspirations for their children and their resultant willingness to do what they can to help realise them. It has done so by respecting the role of the parents as co-educators and from this base creating a range of ways in which parents can become actively involved in their children's education.

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## Case study: St Brendan's Lake Munmorah

### *How a school became their community's central resource*

#### Introduction

St Brendan's Catholic Primary School has approximately 390 students and serves a number of settlements in a coastal lakes region just south of Newcastle in New South Wales.

St Brendan's success in parental engagement is a story of determination by the principal, staff and a core of committed parents and community volunteers whose aim has been to build a cohesive school community that can help parents provide a good all-round education for their children. It is also a story of what can be achieved with a strong pastoral care ethos. In an area short of health and welfare services, it has become a central resource for the community.

#### School context

Students come to St Brendan's Catholic Primary School from several small communities ranging in size from about 2,500 to 6,000 people, which includes relatively new low-cost housing as well as established older housing.

One of the school's aims is to build the capacity of parents. There has always been a core group of parents closely involved and supportive of the school and other parents. However, involvement is concentrated among parents with children in Kindergarten to Year 2, after which participation declines.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The school actively reaches out to parents in what it calls its 'personnel infrastructure', through pastoral care, and personal contact, as well as conventional methods such as newsletters and parent/teacher meetings.

##### *Personnel infrastructure*

The school has a school-based family liaison officer, cluster-based parent educators, a school-based pastoral care co-ordinator (parents), school-based class parents, and an Aboriginal education worker. All are supported by an education officer responsible for parent liaison from the Diocesan Catholic Schools Office, except for the Aboriginal education worker who is supported by the Diocesan Education Officer responsible for Aboriginal education.

The family liaison officer works for two days each week to help the school form closer links with families. A big part of the family liaison officer's work is to reach out to families not engaged in formal school activities. This is done through personal contact and communication, especially with parents who are geographically and educationally isolated.

Parent educators are small groups of parents with special training who visit Diocesan schools to run programs and workshops for parents with children in the early years of schooling. The aim is to build relationships between parents within school communities and develop strong links between the home and school to assist children's learning.

School-based class parents assist class teachers as volunteers, helping with reading, journal writing, sport, craft, excursions and the like. They also welcome new families, and acknowledge births, sickness and deaths and other important family events. The activities of the class parents are tailored to the needs of each class.



The school has a parent who is a voluntary dedicated pastoral care co-ordinator attached to the Parents and Friends Association, who supports, communicates and coordinates the class parents.

### **Pastoral care**

St Brendan's has a whole-school approach to pastoral care and learning which involves parents as key partners.

The pastoral care policy is based on the ROSE principle - Respecting Others, Self, and the Environment. One specific program, *Positive Behaviour for Learning*, has been very successful in helping students, staff and parents.

### **Personal contact**

Making personal approaches to parents by telephone, email or face-to-face has proved to be one of the most successful ways of getting parents' attention. The school supports it with an 'open door' policy that encourages parents to visit their children's classrooms and to contact teachers or the school at any time.

The principal makes a point of visiting the school car park at least once a week to talk to parents as they drop off and pick up their children: "*Nothing is ever going to beat going out into the car park to talk to parents.*"

Sometimes when the principal wants input from parents on a specific issue a staff member goes into the car park in the afternoon with a clipboard and with one key question to put to parents. This has produced better results than sending home questionnaires.

### **Drawing on parents' skills and time**

Parents play a vital role in the life of the school. The Parents and Friends meet regularly and has played a role in developing partnerships between families and the school. The Parents and Friends Association supports and organises social and community events: a kindergarten welcome barbeque, mother's and father's day breakfasts, morning teas and other events.

The Parents and Friends Association also has a role in school governance, with parents being represented on all of the school based committees, such as the Enrolment Committee, Finance Committee, and the Positive Behaviour for Learning Team. As parents have become more comfortable in being included in more areas of school governance, a parent consultative group has been established to support the school leadership.

### **Building parents' capacity**

The school offers a number of parental capacity-building opportunities to parents. These include activities that equip parents with knowledge about what their children are learning so they can be more effectively involved in helping their child.

Numeracy is a major focus. The school has run a *Numbers Alive!* program for Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2 parents. *Numbers Alive!* is a fun, hands-on educational interactive workshop to demonstrate what children are doing in numeracy, how it is taught, the language used, and how parents can help their children at home.

## **Progress/outcomes**

The sustained efforts of the school, committed parents and community participants, are being rewarded by a growing recognition among parents more generally that they are partners in their children's education. Parents have also recognised that by becoming involved in their children's education, they themselves and the community as a whole can be strengthened.



In parent surveys, parents have reported a very high level of satisfaction with the school overall.

Students' satisfaction with teachers and support staff has also been very positive. This level of student satisfaction translates directly into parental satisfaction.

## Critical success factors

The significant factors in the school's success have been:

- a whole-school approach to pastoral care and learning which sees parents as key partners, not only in supporting their children but in supporting other families in the community.
- the 'personnel infrastructure' to support and facilitate parent and community engagement.
- the existence of a core group of committed parents, albeit with changing membership, that has been strongly supportive of the school and its objectives and prepared to help in whatever way is needed.
- the appointment of a family liaison officer whose dedicated task is to develop and maintain connections between the school and parents.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The school is relatively isolated from most of its intake communities which are separated geographically and socially from each other. From this perspective, building and maintaining a cohesive school community is potentially more challenging. The school's emphasis on pastoral care, consistent with its Catholic mission, provides a strong means for connecting parents to the school that can be more successful than using other parental engagement activities, particularly in connecting with parents in the first instance.

The school is acutely aware of the range of health, welfare, social and financial circumstances and responsibilities facing many of its families and that may act as barriers to engagement with the school and their children's learning. While there is a strong commitment to pastoral care, the school is not always able to provide assistance to the extent needed by some families.

## Conclusion

This school, through its pastoral care efforts, has made significant progress in connecting parents to the school and to other parents, and in building parental and community capacity. It has taken a leadership role in providing support to the communities and will be seeking more input as needed from other agencies.

The school has placed parents as partners in their children's learning at the heart of its programs and approaches to facilitate strong partnerships with parents and with student learning.

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## Case study: Toukley Public School

### *Putting parents and students at the centre of school life*

#### Introduction

Toukley Primary School is located on the Central Coast of New South Wales and caters for 580 students. A new initiative of the school is a parent-centred approach to school-family relationships which has brought about significant change in parental engagement.

The approach to engaging families is concentrated on getting parents to be active partners in their children's learning at home. It extends to building parental capacity in their roles as co-educators, parents and participants in the workforce.

Raising students' and parents' expectations of learning is integral. One program, *Making Education Goals Sustainable* (MEGS), has been credited by the school as having a profound and positive impact on parents' and students' views of schooling and of the possibilities for the future.

#### School context

Toukley Primary School is situated in this small coastal town where many families have had three generations at the school. The school is funded under the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program to improve literacy, numeracy and engagement, and is also a school in the Smarter Schools National Partnerships for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities initiative. These programs provide additional funding to support literacy and numeracy programs and to transform the way that schooling takes place.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

A core group of supportive parents participates in the school. However, around 2006, the number of parents participating in the school fell. The recently appointed principal and the school's executive are now driving a new parent-centred approach, and there has been significant improvement. The essence of the new approach is a focus on how the school can support parents with their children's learning and their own learning, rather than on how parents can support the school. The increase in parental engagement in learning has been remarkable in the three years since the inception of the new approach including the development of links with the community.

The school's efforts are concentrated on:

- putting parents, rather than the school, at the centre of the partnership effort
- building parental capacity
- creating a culture of high expectations.

At first, the school tried to encourage parents support in the classroom, but because the parent's own child was not necessarily getting a direct benefit, this was seen as responding to the school's needs rather than the children's needs. Recognising that a different approach was needed, the school asked parents for their suggestions and how the school could fit in with their lives. From the discussions with the parents the school provided a more open information night with their children involved, and a barbeque at the end with school staff. The result was the most successful parent information night ever with over 500 parents and children attending.



Making personal approaches to parents, by telephone, email or face-to-face, has proved to be one of the most successful strategies. The personal contact is supported by an 'open door' policy that encourages parents to visit their children's classrooms, and to contact teachers or the school at any time. Parental capacity-building is a critical element. The school provides numeracy and literacy activities for parents to support their children's learning at home. Training is provided for parents in how to use Moodle, a software package that enables them, from home, to access work that their children have done at school.

The school offers the *Positive parenting* program, to enhance the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents. For parents who are unemployed but want to return to the workforce, the school has supported enrolment in TAFE Work Ready courses. The school hopes that it might be able to offer these courses in the future.

Promoting high expectations to students and parents is integral to the engagement strategy. The school communicates its expectations through its personal relationships with students and their parents, but it is the Making Education Goals Sustainable program that has had the most effect on parents' participating in their children's learning. Making Education Goals Sustainable is credited by the principal, executive and teachers as the turning point in the school's relationship with parents, at least for Year 6 parents, although there has been a flow-on effect to other parents.

Making Education Goals Sustainable is an engagement, attendance and retention strategy that aims to:

- raise student and family awareness of tertiary education;
- raise aspirations of students to participate in tertiary education; and
- raise students' educational attainment to a level that allows participation in tertiary education.

The school also has an Aboriginal Advisory Committee and has been actively involved in the *Dare to lead* program for many years. This program aims to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students, and engaging families and communities is an integral part of the program.

The school community support officer liaises with community groups and represents the school on Together for Toukley, a group including the local council, chamber of commerce, Indigenous people and government agencies that aims to promote a safe and connected community.

## Progress/outcomes

The progress made over three years has been gradual rather than dramatic, and it has been underpinned by 'parent-centred', 'personal contact' and 'high expectations' approaches.

There is evidence of increased parental engagement in school activities and their children's learning, such as increased participation in parent information nights and greater involvement in the Parents and Citizens Association and Aboriginal Advisory Committee.

There have been many signs of parental growth as a result of greater parental engagement. Parents are more confident in contacting the school or teachers to talk about their children's education. They are more satisfied with what the school is doing. Parents who have participated in literacy and numeracy programs to support their children's schooling have reported being more confident in working with their children at home and having a better understanding of the intended learning outcomes. More fathers have become involved in school activities.

The greatest changes so far have come from the Making Education Goals Sustainable program which, school staff say, has led to parents and students placing a higher value on schooling, and seeing more clearly where education can lead.



## Critical success factors

A parent-centred approach to family-school relationships, with a strong commitment by the school is the biggest success factor. This has completely altered the school's culture and placed its relationships with parents on a new footing. The principal, executive and teachers have been ready to try new ideas and to make change where necessary to meet the needs of families and students.

The teachers are enthusiastic and prepared to extend themselves, taking on extra work and training to ensure that parental engagement activities such as Making Education Goals Sustainable work. There has been strong support from the core of parents already engaged with the school.

Funding to employ a community support officer to co-ordinate the school's involvement with the community has been very important because it has helped to create and maintain direct links with key community agencies through membership of the Together for Toukley group.

Funding from government programs to promote parental engagement and to rebuild parts of the school to make it more modern and attractive has also been important.

## Issues – barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The key issue that has been identified as a barrier is the lack of an adequate community room for parents' programs and activities. The school hopes to keep a building that is marked for removal, and turn it into a new community room, so that parents can drop in to meet or chat to other parents and teachers and where a greater range of community-based services and activities can be held.

The school works from the belief that parents love their children and want the best for them. The school is focussing on communicating to parents just how important they are to their children's education, and encouraging parents to become involved in activities so they can support their children in schooling.

## Conclusion

The progress made by this school in engaging parents in their children's learning has been significant. In three years it has transformed the school's culture into one that unites school and family.

Toukley Public School has made the best of opportunities offered by government programs. The school has been involved with wider community initiatives to make Toukley a better place to live; and above all it has placed parents and students at the centre of its work in a way that has positively altered the dynamics of the home-school relationship.

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## Case study: Wilcannia Central School

### *Rebuilding a school, regenerating a town*

#### Introduction

Wilcannia Central School is situated on the Darling River in far western New South Wales, about 200 kilometres north-east of Broken Hill. The school is an important part of the fabric of the town. Under a new leadership team, Wilcannia Central has embraced a partnership role which involves parents, the school community, an organisation called the Community Working Party, the local business people and the townspeople.

Working together, these groups are seeking to regenerate the town and work with its rich Aboriginal culture and an extraordinary history.

The school leadership team and staff are optimistic about the future and are immersed in plans for the school and the town.

#### School context

Wilcannia Central School caters for 138 students from pre-school to Year 12. The pre-school enrolls children from 3 years of age, while some of the courses offered in the senior school attract adults, so the age range of students is broad.

The school offers vocational education and specialist access courses, many related to Aboriginal culture and language. There are also courses in tourism and hospitality, which are connected with the long-term economic future of the town. These courses are designed to include parents as well as students.

The school is on the threshold of a series of new ventures. It has funding to support parental engagement plans under the Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National Partnership, the National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery and the Parental and Community Engagement (PACE) program.

Parents and community leaders want a sound education for their children. Many of the local people maintain their traditional way of life, which is an asset for school programs and for sustaining this rich culture.

#### Key parental engagement strategies

The principal and staff are laying the ground work for strong parental engagement. They are:

- Recruiting literacy specialists
- Working on new home engagement strategies
- Creating a middle years “pod” with three primary teachers continuing the school literacy program for Years 5 to 8 students
- Assigning senior staff to work on student attendance with parents and students
- Adding enterprise-related subjects to the curriculum, including pottery at present with photography, weaving, and print making to come. Several parents have enrolled in a hospitality course at the school
- Engaging the local council to grade the agriculture plot which is to be planted out in Indigenous gardens, with the aim of providing fresh food for home and for school lunches



- Engaging parents to support beautifying the school. For example, an in-kind business is being established whereby one day's work a week in the school agriculture plot is being exchanged for a water purifier made at the school
- Implementing programs involving local authors and artists in-residence to help enhance visual and literary skills among students, and local artists and crafts people are being asked to provide all corporate gifts for visitors to the Regional Education Office
- Working in partnership with the regional Aboriginal business council and other agencies to provide courses in business skills so that the enterprises can become sustainable
- Developing parent and student camps to promote traditional culture, skills and language.

Every opportunity is being taken to secure the participation of local parents in school activities, for their own growth and as role models for their children.

## Progress/outcomes

The school rebuilding project is in its early stages, so it is too soon for specific outcomes. However, there has been a lot of progress in engaging parents, the community and other town leaders, and the school has succeeded in harnessing a range of government-funded programs.

The school has developed relationships with police, local business people and the town's Indigenous Community Working Party. Several Indigenous people have been engaged to undertake learning and classes at the school, including artists, cooks, and those who will farm the agriculture plot.

## Critical success factors

Many positive factors are helping the school engage with parents and the town:

- The willingness of the local community, including local Aboriginal and business leaders, to work with school staff in rebuilding community and school engagement.
- Staff commitment to parental engagement as a means by which they can secure student attendance and then educational outcomes.
- The energy and enthusiasm of the recently appointed school executive staff who have the commitment and experience to develop engaging programs for parents and students who have become disconnected from school.
- The widely held view at the school is that the engagement and personal development of parents will spin off into engagement and education for their children.
- The funded plans under national partnership arrangements which provide the means by which the school's vision can be achieved.
- The availability of school facilities and the flexibility to use them in ways that invite the participation of parents, especially in art, writing, and growing food.
- The potential of agency link up and provision offered by significant federal funding, which may see the school as a key partner in managing issues related to community, parents and children.
- Many in the community see school as a 'good thing' and are prepared to work with the school to improve learning outcomes for their children.

## Issues barriers, sustainability, resourcing

The feeling in the school community is constructive and forward-looking. There is a growing sense of optimism about the engagement of parents and what that will mean for their children and the future of the town.



With successful partnerships the cycle of frustration expressed by some parents may be broken, in particular for those who see little prospect of their children getting work in the town.

The town has been identified by the Australian Government as one of 29 Remote Service Delivery localities across the nation. This brings with it potential for concerted effort by local, state and federal agencies along with community members to develop potential in the town. The school is contacted by many agencies offering funds and wanting to support the partnership with the community.

## Future plans and conclusion

The school staff and community are working together to achieve success in parental engagement and see evidence of positive outcomes. More parents are becoming involved and firm foundations are being laid. There are emerging signs of systemic development, especially in relationship-building with parents, the wider community and townspeople generally. The school is opening up to a changed pedagogy based on engagement of both children and their parents.

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