



# **PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT**

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS**

**AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL**

**2009**

Report prepared for the Australian Parents Council by Dr Denis Muller of Muller & Associates.

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## Introduction

This research paper was commissioned by the Australian Parents Council, which represents parents with children in non-government (Catholic and Independent) schools in Australia.

The central question to be addressed was:

Whether and how parents who are engaged in the education of their children build social capital, promote social inclusion, and boost participation in the economy and add to productivity.

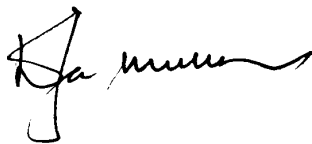
To answer that question, we were asked to conduct a literature review, and to augment that review with case studies from our own research into parental engagement in the education of their children.

The paper was written by Dr Denis Muller, Principal of Denis Muller & Associates, an independent social and policy research consultancy.

The paper is in two parts.

**Part One** consists of a literature review. It begins by examining the shape and nature of parental engagement and the rationale behind it, then moves on to the social and economic effects of parental engagement.

**Part Two** consists of case studies which illustrate the effects of parental engagement from two contrasting engagement approaches.



Dr DENIS MULLER  
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## Part One: Literature review

### Theme 1: The shape and nature of parental engagement

Over the past 25 years or so, a range of strategies have been developed for engaging parents in the education of their children. They include programs to:

- develop family, school and community partnerships;
- help raise awareness in parents about the benefits of becoming engaged in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so;
- help students and families cope with grief and loss, and
- strengthen families' capacity to deal with the everyday demands of raising children.

A substantial literature has developed around the subject, and much of the focus has been on the development of family, school and community partnerships. This is hardly surprising, since the idea of partnerships between these three entities is a complex and evolving one which, by its nature, runs against many social and educational traditions.

Compulsory universal education of children was a contested and radical innovation in Western societies. It brought fundamental change in the relationship between the family and the state, and had far-reaching consequences for labour markets, gender roles, fertility rates and family structures.<sup>1</sup> It also had consequences for the division of responsibilities in the bringing up of children. Traditionally the family has been considered primarily responsible for the social development of the child, and the state – in the form of schools – has been considered primarily responsible for teaching the child work-related skills and academic knowledge. Nowadays this is acquiring the appearance of an artificial division.

Over time, parents not only ceded to schools responsibility for teaching their children work-related skills and academic knowledge, but came to expect that schools would inculcate values and behavioural norms

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Miller, P. and Davey, I., "Family Formation, Schooling and the Patriarchal State", in Theobald, M. and Sellick, R. (eds), *Family, School and State in Australian History*, 1990, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, pp 1-24. See also Chitty, C., "The Changing Role of the State in Education Provision", in Roy Lowe (ed), *History of Education, Vol II*, 2000, London, RoutledgeFalmer, pp285-302.

as well, as research carried out across Australia in 1998<sup>2</sup> revealed. This was just one illustration of the extent to which the traditional boundaries between the role of home and school had become blurred.

Yet the idea that families and schools should see themselves as actively collaborative partners in the development of a child remains a radical departure from a culture in which families and schools still tend to see themselves as parallel but largely disconnected institutions. Central to the development of the new collaborative culture is the fostering of recognition about the shape and nature of parental engagement in education – what it looks like – and what effects it can have on social and economic outcomes. Without parental engagement, the development of a partnership is impossible. However, action to stimulate a partnership involving parents, communities and schools can catalyse parental engagement. The starting point usually is the school because schools can access and engage parents more easily than parents can engage teachers and schools, given the nature of the relationship and the school's usually broader perspective on overall school and community needs.

Recognition of the value of parental engagement in education dovetails with another comparatively recent development in the role of schools, which reinforces the social value of family, school and community partnerships. Research over the past decade shows that schools have become increasingly important as sources of community cohesion and support. In many areas known to be disadvantaged, such as low SES, rural and remote areas particularly, teachers and principals are looked to for community leadership, and schools have become critically important places for the building of civic infrastructure and community capability.<sup>3</sup> This has created a new and powerful basis for challenging the old cultural divide between families and schools, and pointed up the advantages to be gained from including the wider community in the partnerships process.

The partnerships ideal began to receive increased attention from researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the 1980s and 1990s, and in 1994 the US Congress added family-school partnerships to its national 2000 Goals for Education legislation. In Australia, the States and Territories made a commitment to the development of partnerships between schools, families and communities as part of the Human Capital element of the National Reform Agenda in 2007.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Saulwick, I. and Muller, D., *What Parents Want From Their Children's Education*, research report for the National Council of Independent Schools Association, June 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Muller, D. and Saulwick, I., *The Privilege and the Price*, report to the Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> *The Future of Schooling in Australia*, Federalist Paper 2, April 2007, P19.

In 2008, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians also expressed a commitment to partnerships, in these terms:

*Partnerships between students, parents, carers and families, the broader community, business, schools and other education and training providers bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement.*<sup>5</sup>

A pioneer researcher in this field, Joyce Epstein, created a model of “overlapping spheres” to describe the partnership ideal.

*[This] assumes there are mutual interests and influences of families and schools. . . Although there are important differences between schools and families . . . we need to recognise also the important similarities, overlap in goals, responsibilities. And mutual interests of the two major environments that simultaneously affect children’s learning and development.*<sup>6</sup>

The model was based on data collected from teachers, parents and students in what Australians call primary school. She stated:

*The results of the data analyses could not be explained by older sociological theories that stressed that social organisations would be most effective if they set separate goals and worked efficiently and effectively on unique missions. Rather a social organisational perspective was needed that posited that the most effective families and schools had overlapping, shared goals and missions concerning children, and conducted some work collaboratively.*<sup>7</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, the starting point usually needs to be the school. Epstein found that outreach by the school to involve parents other than when there are problems with the child, has been shown to be important in obtaining voluntary engagement by parents. Her research showed that under the traditional model of family-school relations, teachers were more likely to contact parents if the child was having a problem.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [www.Mceetya.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/National\\_Declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Educational\\_Goals-for-Young-Australians](http://www.Mceetya.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals-for-Young-Australians)

<sup>6</sup> Epstein, J. L., *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2001, p31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p43

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p46.

This points up one of the major cultural barriers to the development of effective partnerships. There is some evidence that teachers really want this collaboration on their own terms. A study of just over 250 high school teachers in San Francisco showed that an overwhelming majority did not want more parent-initiated contact and were often resentful of the parent-initiated contact they did get. They welcomed contact when *they* initiated it, for example by asking a parent to come in for a conference or when the teacher wanted some help, but the teachers clearly wanted to control the terms on which the collaboration occurred.<sup>9</sup>

Overcoming that and other barriers to the necessary cultural change has become a major endeavour among policy-makers, practitioners and theorists over the past 25 years. The extent of their efforts can be deduced from the 2002 review by Desforges and Abouchar of literature on parental engagement. They uncovered tens of thousands of citations, and surveyed activity in the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia as part of what became a landmark study in the field.<sup>10</sup>

They identified two distinct bodies of work. One examined the effects of *spontaneous* parental involvement; the other examined interventions that had been designed to *promote* parental involvement.

In relation to *spontaneous* parental involvement, they discerned some clear patterns in the research findings. These were that parental engagement in education:

- takes many forms, including the provision of a safe, stable, stimulating home environment, good role-modelling, and participation in school life;
- correlates strongly with socio-economic status and to a lesser extent with ethnicity;
- diminishes as the child gets older;
- is strongly influenced by the child's level of attainment -- the higher the level, the greater the involvement.

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<sup>9</sup> Dornbusch, S. M. and Ritter, P. L., "Parents of High School Students: A Neglected Resource", *Educational Horizons*, 66, 1988, pp 75-77.

<sup>10</sup> Desforges, C. & Abouchar, A., *Impact of Parental involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review*, Research Paper No 433, Department for Educational and Skills, London, 2002.

Above all, however, “at-home good parenting” had a significant positive effect on children’s achievement even after all the other factors that affect achievement had been taken out of the equation.

In relation to the interventions designed to *promote* parental involvement, however, they concluded that the evaluations available were so technically weak that it was impossible to describe the effects of the interventions on students’ achievements.

At the same time, they noted that evaluations of these interventions told a consistent story. The interventions were getting better at engaging hard-to-reach parents, and generated high levels of commitment, enthusiasm and appreciation among providers and clients.

In general, however, the evidence base was too weak to allow conclusions to be drawn about the link between engaging parents through engagement-promotion programs and student outcomes.

They found one exception: Epstein’s National Programme of Parent/School Partnerships (Kreider, 2000). This had shown that the best effects for students were obtained when the ideal of parental involvement was integrated fully into schools’ development plans, and when a pro-active approach was taken, involving an “action team” of teachers and members of the community.

There is a critical difference, however, between *school-centric* engagement of parents and *school-initiated* engagement. As Bastiani pointed out, a school-centric view sees family involvement solely in terms of the willingness and capacity of parents to support the work of teachers purely on the school’s own terms. This progressively reduces the role of the parents to a subsidiary one.<sup>11</sup> A school-initiated approach sees the parents as co-equals in the educational endeavour, and is directed at awakening parents to their role as the first educators and as continuing co-educators, assisting them, where necessary, to fulfil this role.

The role of the community in the education of young people is seen as part of the community’s wider interest in, and responsibility for, socialising youth and ensuring their success in a variety of social

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<sup>11</sup> Bastiani, J., “I know it works! Actually proving it is the problem”, in Wolfendale, S., and Bastiani, J., (eds) *The Contribution of Parents to School Effectiveness*, London, David Fulton, 2000, p25.

domains.<sup>12</sup> A central principle of Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence in the successful education of young people is that this is achieved best through the cooperation of families, schools and communities, each of which has an interest in the outcomes. Many studies, for example, Crowson and Boyd (1993)<sup>13</sup>, Toffler and Toffler (1995)<sup>14</sup>, and Benson (1997)<sup>15</sup> have argued that schools must reach out to the community if the social capital available to young people is to be strengthened. So outreach by the school to the community is as essential for creating that partnership as outreach to parents is for generating parental engagement. It all starts with the school.

There is a seemingly unbreakable nexus between families, communities and schools which binds the three tightly together in the development of young people. The landmark study by Coleman *et al* in 1966 of the effectiveness of schools in meeting the needs of children, concluded that the school's effects were marginal when compared with the substantive effects of family and community.<sup>16</sup> Jencks *et al* reached a similar conclusion in 1972: that the characteristics of a school's output largely depend on a single input, namely the characteristics of the entering children.<sup>17</sup> These characteristics are largely the product of what the child has already experienced at home and in the community. Biddulph *et al* identified social networks as important in providing opportunities for children's further learning, and in providing support to parents as they endeavour to improve their children's achievement.<sup>18</sup> They noted that genuine home/school collaboration could also lift children's achievements significantly.

## Theme 2: Effects of parental engagement

Partnerships can have beneficial effects on parents, students and teachers, and the greater the overlap between families and schools, the greater the benefits to all three.<sup>19</sup> Data show a link between the

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<sup>12</sup> Sanders, M. G., "Community Involvement in School Improvement: The Little Extra that Makes a Big Difference", in Epstein, J. L. et al, *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, California, Corwin Press, 2002, p30.

<sup>13</sup> Crowson, R. L. and Boyd, W., *Co-ordinated Services for Children: Designing Arks for Storms and Seas Unknown*, American Journal of Education 101, 1993, pp140-179

<sup>14</sup> Toffler, A. & Toffler, H., "Getting Set for the Coming Millennium", *Futurist* 29 (2), 1995, pp10-15.

<sup>15</sup> Benson, P., *All Kids are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Coleman, J. S. et al, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Washington, Office of Education, 1966.

<sup>17</sup> Jencks, C. et al, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effects of Family and Schooling in America*, New York, Basic Books, 1972. p256.

<sup>18</sup> Biddulph F., J. and C., *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration*, Ministry of Education, New Zealand, <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/5947>

<sup>19</sup> Epstein, op. cit. p35.

involvement of families and increases in achievement by students in reading.<sup>20</sup> On this basis, Epstein suggests that specific practices of partnership may help boost student achievement in particular subjects, although she acknowledges that further research would be needed to establish whether this were so.

The evidence about the effect on maths performance, for instance, is not clear-cut. Epstein's study shows that parental involvement does not appear to make a significant difference to student outcomes. Other studies, by contrast, do show a positive effect on maths performance: see, for example, Karraker (1972)<sup>21</sup>, which was an intervention in which parents were instructed in a variety of methods for assisting their children at home. Karraker's methodology appeared to require a high level of parental engagement.

The reasons why the results for mathematics should be ambiguous while those for reading are unambiguously positive are not entirely conclusive, but indicative. Teachers are more likely to ask parents to help with reading, and parents find helping children to read to be the most satisfying way to help. Principals also report that they encourage teachers to involve parents in reading rather than in other subjects.<sup>22</sup>

Even if the effects are confined to reading, however, this is nonetheless centrally important. The extensive longitudinal study by Rowe of more than 5000 students in 92 schools across Australia showed that reading at home had more effect on attainment than did socio-economic variables. He also found a positive carry-over effect between activities at home and behaviour in the classroom.<sup>23</sup>

There is also evidence that teacher leadership in parent involvement in learning activities at home positively and significantly influences change in reading achievement, adding about 4% to the variance explained by the initial characteristics of students and teachers. And parents with more education, and parents who report they have learnt more this year than they knew previously about their children's instructional program, positively influence change in the reading achievement of their children.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Epstein J. L., "Effects on Student Achievement of Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement" in Silvern S. (ed), *Advances in Reading/Language Research, Vol 5*, 1991, pp261-276.

<sup>21</sup> Karkaker, R. J., "Increasing Academic Performance through Home-Managed Contingency Programs", *Journal of School Psychology* 10, 1972, pp173-179.

<sup>22</sup> Epstein, J.L. and Becker, H.J., "Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement: Problem and Possibilities", *Elementary School Journal* 83, 1982, pp103-113.

<sup>23</sup> Rowe, K. J., "Factors Affecting Students' Progress in Reading: Key Findings from a Longitudinal Study", *Literacy, Teaching and Learning* 1, 1995, pp57-110.

<sup>24</sup> Epstein, "Effects on Student Achievement", op.cit, p224.

There is consistent evidence that parents' encouragement, activities, interest at home, and participation at school affect their children's achievement, even after students' ability and family socio-economic status are taken into account.<sup>25</sup>

There is a substantial body of research indicating that parental engagement has a strongly positive effect on student outcomes. A meta-analysis by Henderson & Berla of 66 publications on this topic notes that the most accurate predictor of student achievement is the extent to which the family is involved in the student's education, and that the family's contribution remains critical from the earliest years of childhood to the end of secondary schooling.<sup>26</sup> Henderson is blunt:

*The evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school.*

Several studies have shown the effects of parental engagement on specific aspects of a child's education, including attendance (Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979), classroom behaviour and rate-of-return of homework (Dougherty & Dougherty, 1977; Ayllon, Garber & Pisor, 1975). These studies are summarised in a meta-analysis by Hess & Holloway (1984).<sup>27</sup>

Hess and Holloway also state that successful outcomes of a more general nature had been reported. The examples given were those of Hewison & Tizard (1980) and Tizard, Schofield and Hewison (1982), which had shown that children who were asked to read to their parents gained in reading skills, compared with control groups, at all ability levels in a sample of several hundred students in the early years of schooling in London.<sup>28</sup>

The effect of parental engagement in the education of very young children was demonstrated by the National Home Start Demonstration Project in the United States in 1972. It was targeted at low-income families. An evaluation of the project concluded that children in the program gained on measures of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p221.

<sup>26</sup> Henderson, A. & Berla, N., *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, monograph, Center for Law and Education, Washington DC, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Hess, Robert D. & Holloway, Susan D., "Family and School as Educational Institutions" in Peake, Ross D. (ed) *Child Development Research, Vol 7*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp 185-190.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p186.

school readiness and social-emotional development compared with controls (Love, Nauta, Coelen & Roupp, 1975).<sup>29</sup>

In sum, students do better in school if their parents are involved in various ways, and more parents become involved when schools reach out to establish genuine partnerships programs with parents and communities.<sup>30</sup>

Programs that engage parents and communities ought not be assessed only in terms of their effects on student outcomes. As Capper observes, to do so is to miss half the story.<sup>31</sup> These programs have wider and lasting benefits for parents and the community which can feed directly into improvement of life quality and economic wellbeing for the individuals, the social capital of community and the fortunes of the economy generally. The economic effects of successful educational practices, especially in the early years, of which parental engagement is one, have been measured by Heckman *et al.* Importantly they found that these effects derive from improvements in both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities:

*Our analysis challenges the conventional point of view that equates skill with intelligence, and draws on a body of research that demonstrates the importance of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills in determining economic success. Both types of skills are affected by families and schools, but they differ in their malleability over the life cycle, with non-cognitive skills being more malleable than cognitive skills at later ages.*<sup>32</sup>

Heckman makes the point that the rate of return to a dollar of investment made when a person is young is higher than the rate of return to the same dollar made at a later age. Early investments are harvested over a longer horizon than those made later in the life cycle. In addition, because early investments raise the productivity (lower the cost) of later investments, human capital is synergistic. Learning begets learning. Skills (both cognitive and non-cognitive) acquired early on, facilitate later learning.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p187.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp67-68.

<sup>31</sup> Capper, A., "Evaluation of 'Share', A National Parent Involvement Program", in Wolfendale, S. and Bastiani, J (eds), *The Contribution of Parents to School Effectiveness*, p144.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p92.

<sup>33</sup> Heckman J. J. and Krueger, A. B., *Inequality in America: What Role for Human Capital Policies?* Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 2003, p90.

Non-cognitive abilities matter for success both in the labour market and in schooling. This finding is supported by studies of early childhood interventions that primarily improve non-cognitive skills, with substantial effects on schooling and labour market outcomes.<sup>34</sup>

Much of the effectiveness of early childhood interventions comes from boosting non-cognitive skills and from fostering motivation. Heckman *et al* argue that social policy should be more active in attempting to alter non-cognitive traits, especially in those children from disadvantaged environments who receive poor discipline and little encouragement at home. Such interventions, they say, would benefit the child and the wider society.<sup>35</sup>

Both cognitive and non-cognitive skills raise earnings through promoting schooling and through their direct effects on earnings.<sup>36</sup> Young people enhance their employment chances by accumulating formal schooling and thereby obtaining credentials or knowledge and training useful in the labour market.<sup>37</sup> Probabilities of employment vary directly with educational attainment.<sup>38</sup> There is a firmly established consensus that the mean rate of return to a year of schooling, as of the 1990s, exceeds 10 per cent and may be as high as 17 to 20 per cent.<sup>39</sup> Employment is a pre-condition of access to occupational status, earnings and, for most people, general economic security, as well as a determinant of perceived self-worth.<sup>40</sup>

Differences in these skills appear early and, if anything, widen over a child's life cycle. Parental inputs are important correlates of these skills.

The findings concerning the importance of non-cognitive skills and the connection between childhood development and economic outcomes for individuals have been reinforced by findings from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia (HILDA) Survey. HILDA, a longitudinal panel study commissioned by the Australian Government and carried out by the Institute of Applied Economic and

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p92.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p147.

<sup>36</sup> Heckman, J., Hsee, J. & Rubinstein, Y., "The GED is a Mixed Signal: The Effect of Cognitive and Non-cognitive Skills on Human Capital and Labor Market Outcomes". University of Chicago working paper, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Becker, G. S., *Human Capital*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1975.

<sup>38</sup> Nickell, S., "Education and Lifetime Patterns of Unemployment", *Journal of Political Economy* 87, pp117-131.

<sup>39</sup> Carneiro, P., Heckman, J. & Vytlačil, E., "Understanding What Instrumental Variables Estimate: Estimating Marginal and Average Returns to Education", University of Chicago working paper, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Cohn, R. M., "The Effect of Employment Status Change on Self-Attitudes", *Social Psychology* 41, pp81-93.

Social Research at the University of Melbourne,<sup>41</sup> measured the effect of social capital on the creation of human capital, and in doing so measured the impact on earnings of non-cognitive skills.

As the authors noted, conventionally human capital is measured fairly narrowly by economists, and is defined in terms of formal education, training, work experience, and length of tenure with the one employer. However, these have been found to account for only about 20% of the variance in earnings. The HILDA study explored other factors that might contribute to people's capacity to earn, and discovered that personality traits – specifically conscientiousness and self-efficacy – and individual behaviours and attitudes – including being married or partnered – were also statistically significant determinants of earning capacity.

Essentially, these attributes identified by HILDA are social attributes. These are acquired in a range of ways, including by inclusion within social networks, of which family-school-community partnerships are a variety. Research by Bronfenbrenner *et al*, among others, into school, family and community environments has demonstrated the value of partnerships in building social capital, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.<sup>42</sup>

While noting a paucity of research establishing the nature of influences of family-school-community relationships on students, Bronfenbrenner *et al* credit Almeida (1976, 1978) with establishing that schools exhibiting the greatest gains in student motivation and learning were located in neighbourhoods having the most highly developed social networks. Bronfenbrenner and his associates also identify a number of other studies, including Lightfoot (1978) as demonstrating the beneficial effects on students' school performance and behaviour of strengthened ties between home and school.

Thus partnerships work in two ways: towards the individual by enhancing the acquisition of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and towards the wider society by contributing to the development of social capital.

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<sup>41</sup> Headey, B. and Warren, D., *Families, Incomes and Jobs, Vol 3: A Statistical Report on Waves 1 to 5 of the HILDA Survey*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, the University of Melbourne, 2008, pp92-95.

<sup>42</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U., and Moen, P., "Child, Family and Community" in Peake, Ross D (ed), *Child Development Research, Vol 7*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

Bronfenbrenner's research has also explored the origins of social isolation, identified the circumstances that give rise to it, and considered how they might be altered.<sup>43</sup> Although writing a generation before the advent of globalisation and its impact on political, commercial and social structures, he observed social fragmentation arising from occupational mobility and a range of other factors such as the breakdown of neighbourhoods and the extended family, and concluded that this erosion of the social fabric isolates children and families. Schools alone, he argued, did not promise to be the solution without the involvement of the people who constituted a child's day-to-day environment as participants in the child's education.<sup>44</sup> And he continued:

*It is of crucial importance for the welfare and development of school-age children that schools be re-integrated into the life of the community.*<sup>45</sup>

In Australia, a number of programs have been devised to meet this challenge. One such is a program called *Successful Learning in the Early Years: The Parent Factor*. There is also a parallel program called *Successful Learning in the Early Years: The Indigenous Parent Factor*.

An evaluation of the latter, in 2007-08, found that the program had demonstrated a capacity not only to engage Indigenous parents in the education of their children but also to build self-esteem, raise skills, open pathways to renewed education by parents and in some cases lead directly to employment.<sup>46</sup>

A separate program, designed to promote partnerships between families, schools and communities demonstrated that such partnerships can improve educational outcomes for children, contribute to the building of social capital in the community, and stimulate self-growth among parents.<sup>47</sup>

Some case studies from these programs are given in the next section of this paper.

The effects of such partnerships on community capacity building were examined by the Centre for Health and Society at the University of Melbourne in 2007, in a study of the work of an early learning centre

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<sup>43</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. and Maloney, M. A., *Influences on Human Development*, The Dryden Press, Hillsdale, Illinois, 1975, p485..

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p493.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p499.

<sup>46</sup> Muller, D., *Successful Learning in the Early Years: The Indigenous Parent Factor, An Evaluation*. Report to the Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2008, p7.

<sup>47</sup> Muller, D. and Saulwick I., *Family-School Partnerships Project: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study*. Report to the Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2006, p13.

hosted by a primary school in a low socio-economic area of Melbourne.<sup>48</sup> It stated that the early learning centre was:

*an exemplary model of an organic community hub that is responding to household contexts of socio-economic disadvantage and other vulnerable circumstances among local families.*

Through the early learning centre's function as a hub, it had built community networks by drawing together government and non-government programs in health, family support, neighbourhood renewal and education, and enabled connections to be made between individuals as well as organisations. This had led in turn to the creation of informal social connections among families who were at risk of becoming socially isolated.

To promote this, the school had made available to parents its staffroom, where they could have coffee, read the newspaper, and socialise with other parents as well as with school staff.

Parents reported feeling more self-confident, more capable of looking after their children, and better equipped to participate as partners in their children's education. It had also led directly to the opportunity for parents to volunteer, and provide an example to their children of the value of community service.

A separate study of the work at this school discovered evidence of intergenerational volunteering resulting from the role-modelling now being provided by parents who were working as volunteers in the program. This study also found evidence that the program had directly led to part-time paid employment for parents, some of whom had never previously had paid work.<sup>49</sup> It can be seen that programs designed to engage parents in the education of their children lead not only to better educational outcomes for the child, but to richer social capital.

Social capital is a concept that has its roots in education, having been coined by the state supervisor of schools in West Virginia, L. J. Hanafan. Writing in 1916, he explained that social capital accumulated when the individual came into contact with his neighbours, and they with other neighbours. The resultant

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<sup>48</sup> Warr, D., *Outside the School Gates*, Centre for Health and Society, University of Melbourne, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Muller D. and Holmes, B. unpublished research into the effects of family, school and community partnerships for the Australian Family, School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008.

social intercourse “may immediately satisfy his social needs and may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community”.<sup>50</sup>

He defined it as:

*. . . those . . . substances that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely, goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among individuals and families who make up a social unit.*

This lineage of the term was traced by Robert D. Putnam in his revelatory account of what he calls the collapse and revival of American community.<sup>51</sup> He explains how social capital “works its magic”:

*First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily. Social scientists have long been concerned about “dilemmas” of collective action. Such dilemmas are ubiquitous and their dynamics are straightforward. People might all be better off if they co-operate, with each doing her share. But each individual benefits more from shirking her responsibility, hoping others will do her work for her.*<sup>52</sup>

To illustrate: During a visit to Australia, Putnam pointed to what he said was an excellent case study in which the social capital of certain suburbs of Brisbane might be measured. His visit coincided with the discovery of Argentine fire ants in these suburbs. To eradicate this destructive pest, it was necessary for every householder in the affected area to fumigate their house. If even one householder shirked this responsibility, the efforts of all others would be rendered futile. Thus the success or otherwise of the affected community in eradicating the fire ant would be a clear measure of the community’s social capital.

The second way in which Putnam says that social capital confers benefits is that it “greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly”, by multiplying the interactions between people and so, through familiarity, allowing people to learn whom to trust, thus quickening the community’s capacity to engage in economic as well as social transactions.

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<sup>50</sup> Hanifan, L. J., “The Rural School Community Center”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67, 1916, 130-138.

<sup>51</sup> Putnam, Robert D., *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000, 19,

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 288.

The third benefit was that social capital engendered further connections which in turn widened each individual's awareness of "the many ways in which our fates are linked". This, he says, promotes tolerance and empathy, reduces cynicism, facilitates sharing of information that helps individuals achieve their goals, and gives people someone to turn to in time of trouble.

Putnam argues that child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. He states that research dating back at least 50 years has demonstrated that trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group and larger community have wide-ranging effects on a child's opportunities and choices, and hence on their behaviour and development.<sup>53</sup> He constructed a state-by-state Social Capital Index in the US and compared it with a popular US measure of child well-being, the Kids Count indices published annually,<sup>54</sup> and found a high correlation between the Social Capital Index and students' scores on standardised tests in primary, middle and high schools.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusions

The literature tells a consistent and connected story.

Schools have become critically important places for the building of civic infrastructure and community capability.

Schools, families and communities have overlapping goals, influences, responsibilities and interests in the raising of children.

This provides the basis for family, school and community partnerships as one way of generating parental engagement.

The impetus for parental engagement needs to come from the school through outreach to parents and the community, because the school is in a stronger position to initiate the outreach and tends to have a broader perspective on school and community needs than do individual parents.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 296.

<sup>54</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, 1999. [www.aecf.org/kidscount/index.htm](http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/index.htm)

<sup>55</sup> Putnam, R.D., Op. cit. 299-300.

However, there is an important distinction here between school actions that are *school-centric*, and those that are *school-initiated*. *School-centric* actions seek to engage parents on the school's terms; *school-initiated* actions seek to engage parents on mutually shared terms. So while outreach by the school is vital, the nature of the outreach is also important.

There are some barriers to this, including some evidence that teachers really want partnerships on their own terms.

Some parent-engagement activities arise from *spontaneous* parent engagement. The benefits of these for student outcomes are more conclusively measured than are those of interventions to *promote* parental engagement. However, spontaneous activities are highly dependent on the socio-economic status of families and other variables known to affect student outcomes. Activities to *promote* partnerships are needed if the engagement net is to be cast more widely. Measuring the effects of these interventions on student outcomes is more difficult, but there is evidence that these interventions are getting better at engaging hard-to-reach parents, and they generate high levels of commitment, enthusiasm and appreciation from those involved.

However, these programs seldom begin without some kind of resourcing by the school, and are rarely sustainable without security of resourcing. The study by Muller and Saulwick (2006)<sup>56</sup> revealed the benefit of seed funding, in which each participating school received a grant of government money which many used to employ a part-time parent liaison officer. Without the seed funding, many of the projects would not have got off the ground. Subsequent visits to a small sample of these schools in 2008 showed that after the funding had run out, there was a tendency for the partnership initiative to shrink or disappear, except where the same principal was still in office, and where the school had the capacity to put in its own money. This was a rare combination.

Similarly, the study by Muller (2008)<sup>57</sup> of a program to engage Indigenous parents in the education of their children showed that the sustainability of what was a highly successful program was contingent on there being sufficient funding to create and maintain an appropriate support structure.

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<sup>56</sup> Muller, D. & Saulwick, I., *Family-School Partnerships: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study*, op.cit.

<sup>57</sup> Muller, D., *Successful Learning in the Early Years: The Indigenous Parent Factor*, op.cit.

It is clear, then, that if family, school and community partnerships are to be created and sustained, funding for this specific purpose is essential.

Programs that engage parents and communities ought not be assessed only in terms of their effects on student outcomes. These programs have wider and lasting benefits for parents and the community which can feed directly into improvements in the life quality and economic wellbeing of individuals, the social capital of communities and the fortunes of the economy generally.

Research into parent engagement programs in Australia show that they have the capacity to not only engage parents in the education of their children, but to build self-esteem, raise skills, open pathways and in some cases lead directly to employment for parents. It is in these ways that they lead not only to improved educational outcomes for children, but generate the wider benefits described above.

Thus parental engagement generates effects in two directions: towards outcomes for individual students, and towards developing social capital in communities.

Social capital, in turn, is an important influence in the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills in young people, and both of these skill sets are necessary to successful and productive engagement in the economy. This shows up in employment rates and in earnings levels.

Schools exhibiting the greatest gains in student motivation and learning are located in neighbourhoods having the most highly developed social networks. Social networks are a key measure of social capital.

There is a high correlation between social capital of students' environments and students' scores on standardised tests in primary, middle and high schools.

The literature thus reveals a pattern of interacting and reciprocating forces. Schools that generate partnerships with parents and the community also generate parental engagement in the education of children. Children do better educationally when their parents are engaged in their education. Engagement of the community leads to a building of social capital. Children who grow up in circumstances where their parents are engaged in their education, and in communities that enjoy high

social capital, develop better cognitive and non-cognitive skills, both of which contribute directly to academic progress, participation in employment and economic well-being.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate these connections.

Given that the rate of return on a dollar of spending on education, especially in the early years, is high, the public-policy argument for government investment in this kind of activity would seem to be strong.

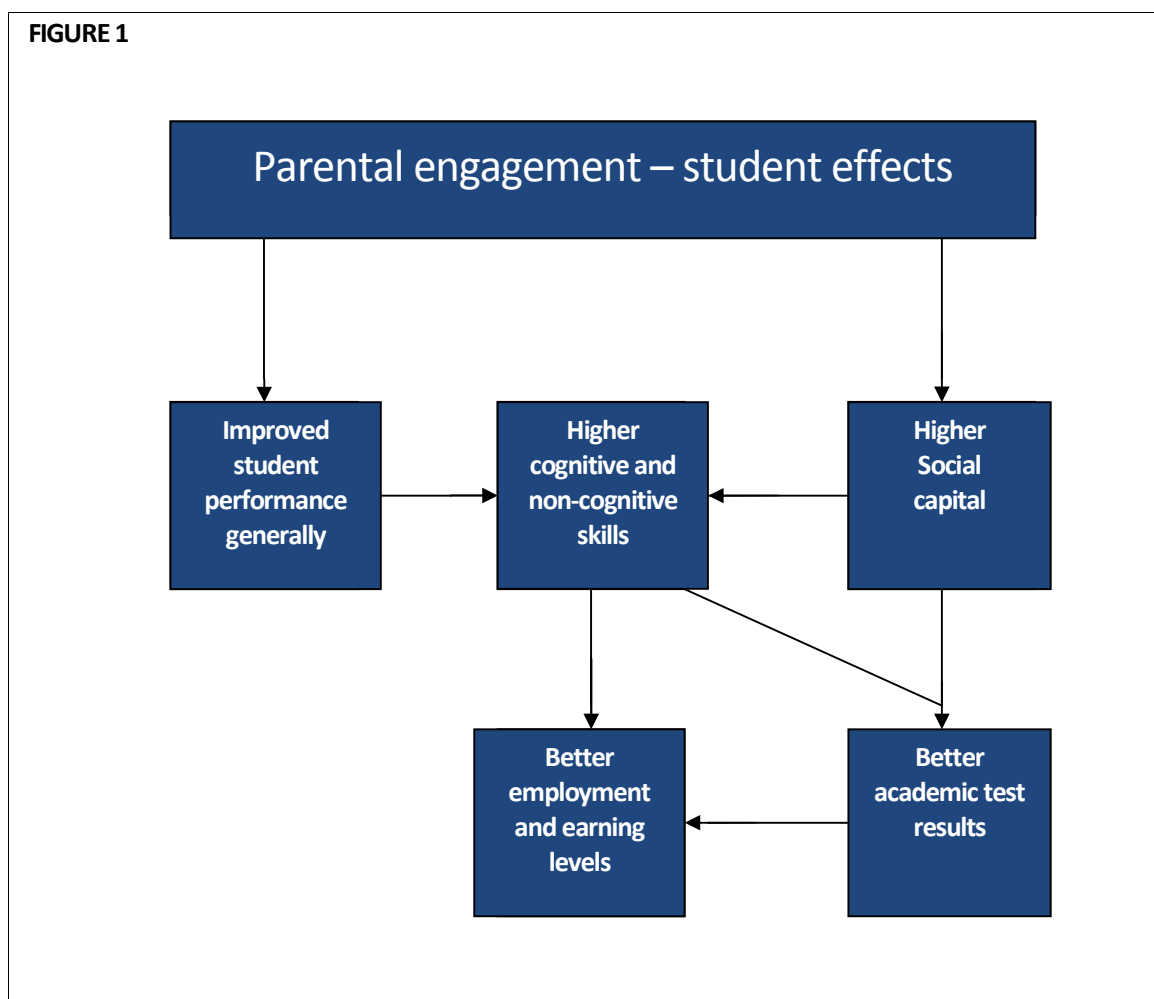


FIGURE 2

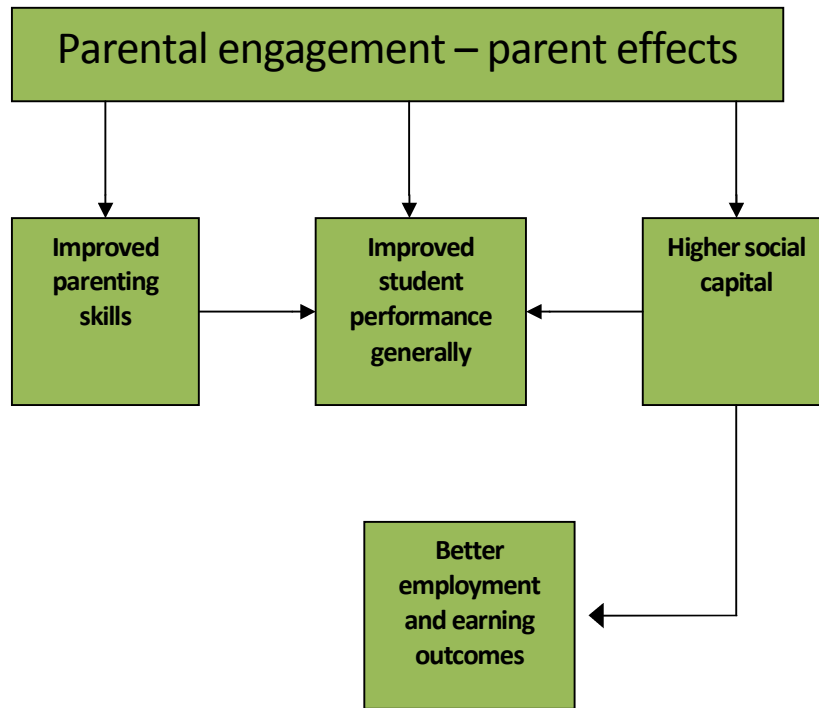
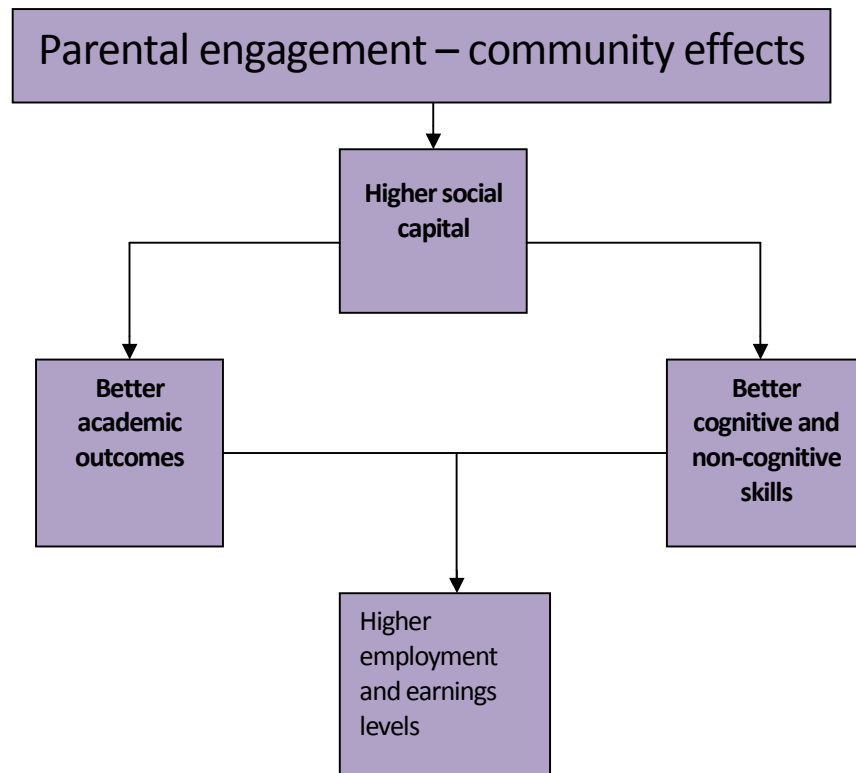


FIGURE 3



## Part Two: Case studies

These four case studies are drawn from research in 2005 and 2007 that evaluated the effects of parental engagement which had been stimulated by two quite different programs.

The first three are all drawn from the *Family-School Partnerships Action Research Program, 2005*, which was designed to help schools devise and implement family-school partnerships that were suited to their own school community and which fitted into their own priorities.

They clearly fall within the category of programs designed to “promote” parental engagement, as defined by Desforges and Abouchaar, rather than within the “spontaneous” category.

The fourth case study has been developed from an evaluation of a program called *Successful Learning in the Early Years: The Indigenous Parent Factor*, which was designed specifically to engage Indigenous parents in the education of their children.

Despite these different designs and objectives, as the case studies illustrate, they both resulted in improved outcomes not just for students but for families and school communities. In other words, they both laid the groundwork for later life in individual students and added to the communities’ social capital.

### Case 1: Early Learning Centre and Parent and Community Centre

This case is based on two separate but related initiatives.

The Early Learning Centre prepares children aged from birth to four years for school, and at the same time educates their parents in how to assist with the child’s development.

The Parent and Community Centre is a social support centre for parents and anyone in the community who feels in need of it. The Centre consists of a converted classroom which the school has furnished in a homely manner with settees, easy chairs, dining table, and computer.

There is a weekly meeting there. Free child care is provided in an adjoining room. A small one-way window allows the parents to look in on their pre-schoolers while they are being cared for.

## **Background**

This primary school of 280 students is located in a low socio-economic area of a State capital city, where unemployment is high and family dysfunction common. About half the students are on the local equivalent of the Education Maintenance Allowance and there is a high percentage of single parents.

Two senior teachers initiated the two elements of the project. At the time – 1999 – the school was looking for ways of arresting a long-term decline in enrolments and of staving off the possibility of being merged with another school or closed. The current principal was new and almost one-third of the teaching staff had just been replaced. A cultural change was under way. Its main element was to re-connect the school with its community, from which it had become estranged.

When the two teachers proposed the idea of a parent centre, linked with the provision of pre-school education, the principal saw it as a means of giving effect to the cultural change he wished to bring about. The initiatives had – and continue to have – his full support, and the teachers concerned spoke most warmly of him.

An experienced kindergarten teacher was enlisted to assist in setting up the Early Learning Centre.

A parent who is active in school-related activities at a state and national level also happened to work as a teacher's assistant at the school. She harnessed her energy to the cause, and this clearly helped in maintaining momentum.

## **Engaging parents**

The teachers in the pre-Kinder program and in the early years of primary were sensitive to what parents were saying about wanting to bring their toddlers into the school, and creative in setting up a special program for them. They were also sensitive to what parents said about their social isolation, and proposed setting aside a room that could be used by parents as an informal meeting place.

The teachers obtained the support of the principal, and at first provided leadership to the parents in setting up the community room. Gradually they relinquished this leadership role to the parents as the capacity grew in some of the parents to lead.

The school recognised that many of its parents had had bad experiences of school, so took pains to ensure they could come and go without passing through the “front office”, which is an intimidating place for some parents.

In summary, the school listened, responded to real needs, and created a welcoming place which was easy for apprehensive parents to enter.

### **What the principal said about the project**

*School wasn't a particularly pleasant place for a lot of our parents, so there is a reluctance to come into school. You come in when you're angry or something's gone wrong. As adults they often lack self-esteem or the confidence to be involved in programs.*

*The group started off as a support group. The initial topics were behaviour management. But we couldn't have it as “come to the parenting group” because people had this thought that if I go there, they'll think I'm a bad parent. So it had to be couched in the terms of coffee and a chat.*

*At first [the teachers] raised questions about whether they were having trouble with their children. The group now really set their own agenda. It's developing into a powerful group. Our challenge is to keep bringing new people in so it doesn't become so tight that others can't get in.*

*At times some of the participants will disclose things which are fairly harrowing. One of the participants has gone back to school [to complete her secondary education] pretty much on the strength of what she heard at the meeting*

### **What the teaching staff said about the project**

The Kindergarten teacher who conducts the Early Learning Centre:

*Talking to the mums we found this was the only centre for the mums and dads and the community to come in this area.*

*We moved down to the bottom end [of the school buildings] where there was an empty wing and this really facilitated the growth of all these things because they could come in the bottom door, and they could make it their own.*

#### **The teacher who facilitates the community centre:**

*We could see a need from the people we spoke to. Sometimes they needed to know, what do I do? I can't get him to bed. He won't eat his tea. Doesn't want to come to school. It has built up really strong empathic connections between the whole group. Sometimes there hasn't been a dry eye in the house, when some parent has felt safe enough to divulge something really important that's happening at home that's impacting on their children and that we need to know about at school. I find that the most rewarding.*

#### **What the parents said about the project**

*We've got good word out in the community. Out and about in the supermarket I'll hear parents say they want to bring their children up to [this school]. They've heard about the good things that are going on.*

*It's a home away from home.*

*What's said in this room doesn't go out of the room. So you can talk about problems.*

*I've been to counsellors and they judge you. And here you talk to other mums and it's not like that.*

*I can go on and talk to the kids' teachers and get them involved. It's not just our problem any more. It's a shared problem.*

#### **Researcher's observations**

The project appears to have acquired legitimacy among parents because it is responsive to their needs and because the school staff have allowed the parents to take control as their confidence and capabilities have grown.

Responsiveness to needs has been crucial, and the needs have been many. These parents needed somewhere to turn for advice about parenting and for "downloading" their emotional burdens among people who respected their confidences and did not judge them.

Friendships have been forged, and networks created that have gone beyond the confines of the school community, breaking down isolation, building up self-confidence, and allowing people to learn how to cope.

The benefits to the children's education appeared to be that the parents were more in touch with what was happening at school, felt integrated into the education of their children, felt empowered to communicate on an equal footing with teachers, and were fortified in being able to deal at home with the social circumstances that had a disruptive effect on the children.

Data on the effects of the community centre are largely anecdotal and qualitative. However, membership data indicate that the number of people coming to the community centre has grown from about six to about twenty, and they are beginning to include people from the wider community. Considering the history of disengagement between the parents and the school, and the significant level of disadvantage in the parent community, this is remarkable progress in a few years.

Data on the Early Learning Centre are startling. The figures in the tables below were provided by the school after an at-risk assessment had been made in 2005 of the 36 children in that year's kindergarten cohort.

**Impact of Early Learning Centre attendance on student-at-risk factors**

	Attended Centre (n = 20)	Did not attend (n = 16)
Not at risk	19	6
At risk	1	10

It can be seen that of the 20 children who had attended the Early Learning Centre, only one was assessed as being at risk. By contrast, of the 16 in the cohort who had not attended the Centre, 10 were assessed as being at risk.

## Case 2: Multicultural learning community

The aim of this project was to build a stronger community between the school, with 90% of its students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and the parent community.

The actions were to:

- Establish and maintain a play group for pre-school children and mothers of children who will be entering the school in Kindergarten.
- Initiate a more comprehensive transition program than in previous years, beginning in Term 3 with Kindergarten Orientation, continuing in Term 4 for children who will enter Kindergarten the following year.
- Conduct a series of eight bilingual workshops for parents with topics requested by parents, e.g. parenting skills, road-safety, anti-bullying, bilingualism.
- Conduct a parent excursion so that parents experience the educational learnings that children gain through such an event.

### **Background**

This primary school of 205 students serves a concentrated area of social disadvantage in a high-density suburb of a large State capital city. The 90% of families from non-English-speaking backgrounds speak 16 different languages and come from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific.

The school has a considerable commitment to supporting these families, providing community language teachers, translating and interpreting services, and an English as a Second Language (ESL) team.

In 2004 it set out to re-form its parents' association, going out of its way to include Asian and Middle Eastern parents by holding weekly parent meetings in Vietnamese and Arabic.

Initially some staff had resisted the project, expressing concern about giving parents "a voice" and empowering them to take on guided leadership roles. It was a priority of the principal to change this culture.

## **Engaging parents**

This project was driven by the principal's conviction that the school had a mission to reach out and involve parents who, because of language and cultural barriers, were not engaged with the school. First she had to overcome doubt and resistance by some staff to the idea of empowering parents. Then it was a matter first of listening closely to what parents said their needs were.

The imaginative responses – English language assistance, parent excursions to interesting places – and the consequent creation of social networks among parents from different cultural backgrounds resulted in parents being provided with something they enjoyed, and could feel themselves benefiting from.

This “enjoyment” factor was important in engaging these parents and helping them overcome their shyness. This was achieved not only by the activities already mentioned but by creating a place where parents could come together to knit, sew, or garden.

## **What the principal said about the project**

The principal said that the fundamental aim of the project had been to develop the involvement of parents in the school and that this was being achieved gradually. As a result of the project there were more parents coming to the school through the play group, the parent excursions and the workshops. More were coming to social and major school events and more had become involved in different activities, such as gardening, craft activities and in sewing children's costumes. More listened to the messages at assembly and this had been a crucial change for the parents with little English.

The next stage would be to gradually involve parents in classroom activities. Cultural differences made this difficult as the Vietnamese parents saw the classroom as the domain of the teachers while many of the Arabic parents did not have self-confidence or enough English. An underlying aim had been for the project to achieve professional learning for the teachers, many of whom had dismissed hope of parents being involved. The principal hoped that the teachers would see that parents can be willing if the right type of communication develops with them. The principal commented that the teachers needed to see that “education” extended outside the walls of the classroom.

The principal commented that she thought parents could be gradually involved in classrooms through the use of bilingual big books for literacy sessions. If these books were not available for purchase it could be

possible to have some developed. It was also hoped that some could be involved in helping small groups of children in art and craft lessons or mathematics but this would only happen gradually and parents were mentored. She also saw it as important to have the parents making decisions about their involvement so they felt valued and not just “told” what they should do by the principal or teachers. Therefore to change this focus, the name “parent workshop” was changed to “parent information session”.

### **What the person with carriage of the project said about it**

The deputy principal was responsible for organising and maintaining the playgroup and the transition program. The playgroup proved to be a significant success with more mothers attending through the year and more people outside the immediate vicinity of the school hearing about it. She has learnt that the Islamic Council recommends it.

The transition program went for eight weeks with mothers and children attending two hours a week for the first four weeks then leaving the children for the second four weeks.

The second excursion to a museum had attracted more mothers and made them very enthusiastic about having more such outings.

### **What other staff said about it**

Staff commented that there had been a significant change in the involvement of parents. One of the teachers commented:

*We've found that parents learnt a lot from the workshops and that they are now communicating more with each other. They like to see each other and they were very excited on the excursions and these helped them learn what their children learn.*

Teachers felt that more parents were helping in other areas, such as making costumes for school concert. Teachers were pleased with the “parent excursions” as teachers had had difficulty convincing parents of the value of such events for children. Teachers commented that more parents had attended Book Week in 2005 than previously and asked advice about various books for their children.

### **What the parents said about it**

*The workshops are good because we're all from different cultures and different backgrounds but every single Mum is going through the same thing. You know, you realise that as a parent it doesn't matter whether you're Greek, Australian, Arabic, you have the same issues.*

*We feel like we know more about what's happening in the school now. We understand more about how the school is teaching our children. We enjoy each other's company and the relationship we have with other parents and the teachers.*

*The workshops have done this. Encouraging people to come along and participate. You think, what information are they going to provide? You go along and it's a lovely social atmosphere and it encourages you to go again to the next one, then the next one. You learn something from each workshop.*

### **Researcher's observations**

The parent excursions had had a significant effect and the parents had been on a second excursion to the museum. They were proud as they recounted that they were the largest adult group to go there. They strongly requested that the school organise more of these. They commented that more mothers had attended the second excursion.

The playgroup, linked with an extensive transition program, had helped both children and mothers be more confident about starting school, as the children were more familiar with the school itself and comfortable with the other children.

This project has used best educational practice in that it started where it could pick up the parents at a point of common understanding and gradually build. The "hands on" approach ran through the workshops, excursions and the play group. The improvement in the confidence of parents, particularly the Arabic mothers, was obvious between the first and second forum. It was delightful to see the bonds of friendship that had developed. It was particularly heartening to see their pride in commenting that they were a true multicultural community.

This project confirms that 'best practice' can only develop from identifying the specific needs of the particular school and parent community. There is no single formula. There needs to be consultation and

communication in a non-threatening way between all sections of the school community: principal, parents, teachers, students. This project demonstrated that more than one approach can be successful.

### **Summary of findings from data collected by the school**

Evidence of changes effected through each initiative to improve communication between the school and families was observable in the parent interviews as discussed above and is available in several documents that the school produced:

- Increased numbers of parents and children attending playgroup.
- Increased numbers of parents participating in parent workshops.
- Increased numbers of parents participating in both Arabic and Vietnamese support groups.
- Increased numbers of parents participating in P & C.
- Increased numbers of student being enrolled for Kindergarten for 2006 compared with previous years.
- Increase in parents attending second parent excursion.

### **Case 3: Guiding and supporting teens**

The project had three prongs that targeted certain Year 9 girls, Year 9 boys and their parents. The students were assessed by their teachers as being at risk of disengaging more from school. They were experiencing social problems or isolation or they demonstrated challenging behaviour problems. While the project built on two existing programs for parents and girls, this was the first time the school had had the opportunity of offering a boys' program and a simultaneous parenting program that targeted the parents of selected students.

*Girls Going Great* – a seven-week program of 2.5 hours each week held during school time and consisting of craft, companionship and learning behaviour strategies to improve connecting and communicating with others. The female chaplain and School Guidance Officer facilitated the program.

*Boys Bouncing Back* – a seven-week program of two hours each week held during school time where boys participated in school sessions and other active pursuits e.g. playing pool, laser force a pursuit game.

The program included assisting the boys to develop resilience, improve their communication, set goals and practise anger management. A Head of Department and a deputy principal facilitated the program.

*Teen Triple P* (Ralph & Sanders, 2002) – a four-week program of two hours per session held once a fortnight for parents of the selected young people. The Positive Parenting Program aimed to manage common developmental issues and teenager behaviour problems such as disobedience, aggression, peer relationship problems, school-based difficulties, family conflict and other everyday difficulties experienced by parents and teenagers. The school chaplain and guidance officer facilitated the program.

### **Background**

This secondary school in a State capital city has 950 students who come from families with a lower/middle to middle socio-economic background. A large number of parents experience financial hardship and find it difficult to meet costs associated with their child's education. About half of the students live in single-parent or blended families. The school has a reputation for supporting students who have challenging behaviours and as such it often attracts students who have had difficulty in other schools. Approximately 20% of students have English as a second language and the school has a reputation for high levels of tolerance and inclusive practices. Young people with physical and intellectual disabilities are integrated into the school, and staff work with families to ensure positive outcomes.

### **Engaging parents**

Personal contact was the key here. Many of the parents were disaffected by schooling and needed direct personal encouragement from the school staff to become involved. The school also provided programs which supported what parents were trying to do in sometimes very difficult circumstances.

The program resonated with parents: it met their needs in this area. It was not so much a case of finding out what the needs were – this much was fairly obvious – but of persuading parents that the school could help them and was willing to do so.

It took the work of five dedicated staff to do this. A big lesson from this project is that in some situations the commitment of time has to be almost open-ended.

### **What the principal said about the project**

*The project has been a great success and we will continue it as much as we can. We don't normally have the money to be able to do some of those things. The self-esteem that came with being able to take parents and the students to the celebration dinner and guarantee they would turn up was wonderful. I think the celebration graduation dinner was fantastic and parents were so proud of their kids. The way the students presented themselves on that night -- their decorum -- these kids don't get that very often and that is what made it so special.*

*I would say that because of this program, parents are now much more willing to come to school but you can't break down the barriers in such a short time.*

What about different ways you encouraged parents to come?

*In the past we have had the good parents come along and we failed to encourage the ones we wanted to come. We recognise that people like Jan (guidance officer) and her efforts to phone each one with an invitation that made it all happen. The parents gained so much from each other.*

*One of the girls who still continued to have difficulties was able to sit down with me and she suggested she should go on a report sheet - that is where we monitor their behaviour very closely -- and in the end her sheet was marvellous. But she made the suggestion herself. I believe this program has helped these kids see things in a different light. And at home too parents are working to get along with their teenagers and it is working.*

### **What the person with carriage of the project said about it [Guidance Officer]**

*[Parent leader] and I felt so elated after each session and we felt we were really accomplishing something. With the girls when we took them out on an excursion, we felt it was really worth it. They often said, "Thank you, we really enjoyed that", and then if things started to go wrong for the, they came to us to talk about it. Similarly, the parents . . . even the one girl who left the program, her mother kept coming and said she gained so much from it. She even attended the celebration dinner.*

*The students can now say I respect the person even if I do not like their decision.*

*Teachers have said some of the girls no longer backchat and they are starting to see changes.*

### **What other staff said about it [School Chaplain]**

*I think it was really successful. This time it was very school-focused and perhaps we could use other community groups as well: for example, church groups, RSL, and ask these groups to help us to facilitate parts of the program.*

What about staff?

*At first some staff thought we were rewarding students for being difficult but they soon saw the turn-around with so many of these students and they were grateful for the program.*

### **Researcher's observations**

The project achieved its goals. There were five dedicated staff who took a keen interest in the program's succeeding and they supported the students to the highest degree, always believing they were capable young people who could do well if given the opportunity. Each time I visited the school I felt welcome and each member of staff showed the highest level of support for the project. As a team they had worked out ways of budgeting the funds so that the Year 9 boys and girls and their parents all benefited. This project proved to be a way of connecting disaffected parents who were not regular participants at the school. The celebration breakfast and dinner brought these families together and some connections were made with parents planning to meet for dinner together at a later date. For some single parents this was particularly welcomed. Making a personal telephone call to parents and inviting them to participate in the parent program was a very good strategy.

## **Case 4: Successful Learning in the Early Years - The Indigenous Parent Factor**

This program was specifically designed with the following objectives in mind:

1. Increase and improve understanding among Indigenous parents of the ways their children learn, especially in the early years.
2. Increase the knowledge among Indigenous parents and carers about how young children learn to read and write.

3. Persuade Indigenous parents and carers of the importance of school and pre-school attendance by their children.
4. Develop partnerships between Indigenous parents and schools.
5. Develop further understanding among Indigenous parents of how much their children gain when parents are involved in their education.
6. Encourage in Indigenous parents the realisation that their own confidence will benefit from their being involved in their children's education.
7. Establishing a pattern of adult learning in Indigenous communities.

The program was evaluated in 2007 towards the end of its first triennium. This case study has been constructed from the evaluation report. It is based on visits to five sites where the program was delivered. Three of these sites were in remote or regional areas, and two were in State capital cities. Very similar themes about the effects of the program were heard at all sites, which is why an amalgam like this nonetheless accurately reflects what was found.

### **The effect on parents**

The overarching effect has been to increase parents' self-confidence, and it is this that has led to many of the other benefits, some of them life-changing. Trainee presenters described the effects on parents – including themselves – in these terms:

*It opens doors and gives them opportunities to share a part of their lives and experiences.*

What doors?

*Knowing they are the first people in their children's lives. They are the key people. The workshop has an empowering effect in helping them see they are the key people.*

*They feel more confident in themselves and to come in and work with the teacher for their child.*

*Some of the parents who did the workshop then had the confidence to do a TAFE course which was designed to help them help their children with their schooling. Twelve parents did the TAFE course and eight are about to graduate.*

There were many personal stories illustrating the effects of this confidence-building. Here are two.

**Parent (K):**

*I would say I have more confidence than I used to have. It's something I feel inside.*

**Trainer:**

*When I first met K about two years ago she wouldn't say boo. And I've watched her grow. I took her down to do these workshops and she was nearly sick with fear. I said, the first time you can sit and watch. So we get out of the first one and she says, do you want me to present next week? She presented at the next two workshops, so she's grown enormously in confidence.*

The second story also illustrates two further facets of the program, its capacity to overcome the barrier of illiteracy, and to encourage parents into further education.

**Parent:**

*I've got dyslexia. I can't read. [Workshop facilitators] used little words rather than bigger words, and they showed me what to do.*

*I even got up on the day we did the workshop and told them it was different for me because I couldn't read, but it didn't stop me.*

*And it was good for other parents to hear that, because some of them were struggling,*

*JA and W [local organisers] pushed me and pushed me to get me here, and I'm not going away now.*

**Local organiser:**

*And now she's gone on to TAFE and doing Cert III to be a teacher aide.*

In more general ways – personal and communal – parents described how their increased confidence had paid dividends.

*We run a lot of workshops, one called Bridging the Gap, and there are lots of others. Normally we'd get presenters to come in and present it for us but now we are able to do it ourselves. We used to be just too shy to get up and do it.*

*When we first started I was too frightened to get up and talk but by the end of it they couldn't get me off. I hadn't spoken to a group before but now I'm not shy to voice my own opinion because of the confidence from that training. That was because of the way the trainers put it to you, encouraged you to get up and do it.*

For some parents, it had fundamentally changed the way they dealt with their children, and helped them understand more about their children's developmental stages.

*It has brought us closer to our children. We're not brushing them off any more. I used to brush my children off. I'd say to my daughter in grade 2, go away, I don't want to read to you any more. I hate to say it. Since this course I sit down and listen to her reading. She was at level 9 for reading and now she's at level 20.*

*I learnt to be more patient and to be more encouraging and give more praise, to give time.*

*My son has opened up to me and I've got a lot more time for him now.*

*Since I did this, seeing other people having all the same struggles, it was great. I found it was easier to relate to my child.*

### **Effects on the children**

The extent to which the benefits to the parents were flowing on to the children was difficult to gauge, partly because the program had been running for only three years, partly because the reach of the evaluation was limited by time and budget, and partly because causation in the area of childhood development is inherently complex, there being so many variables.

Hence this evaluation did not claim to do more than report anecdotally on the flow-on effects to children. The pattern of these anecdotes, however, was such as to indicate that the program probably did have positive effects on the children of the parents and carers who participate. No negative effects were reported.

Teacher aides, who themselves had trained as presenters, offered these observations of the effects on their own children or grandchildren, as well as on the children they worked with in the classroom:

*I've used a lot of techniques as an aide, letting them read a story without interrupting them and correcting them, and I've noticed a lot more confidence in the kids, which is fantastic. And I've been doing the same things with my grandchildren. And we read a few little things every night, and they love it and they fight over who's going to read and they read with more confidence.*

*I found with the children their comprehension is much better because the parents know what the children should be learning from the book. They walk them through the book.*

*More kids now are handing in their homework, more than they did over previous years. I think it's just basic stuff: they are now able to help their children at home.*

*They know what the children are being taught and so you don't get arguments over "no that's not the way we do it these days" and "this is how we did it years ago". So this is really great because now they can help their children at home, and that's why we've upped the numbers in homework this year.*

In one case, the effect on parent and child went well beyond education and wrought change at a deep personal level, as recounted by a trainee presenter who had given a workshop. She described what happened afterwards:

*One parent and her daughter didn't identify as Indigenous. After this course she was in tears and she came to me a couple of days later and said, I've spoken to my daughter and we want to identify and we want to learn about Aboriginal culture. And I thought, O God this is so good. It's given her the confidence to be proud of who she is and who her daughter is. A lot of things had happened, of course, in the past, but she doesn't have to feel fearful about that. She can be proud. That was so lovely.*

In some communities, especially smaller and more isolated ones, the program had brought together parents, aides and other school staff from the Catholic and Government school sectors. This was the case at all three of the isolated sites visited for the evaluation.

*We overcame the barrier between Government and Catholic sectors, just by working together. It's about our kids, about education; it's not about sectors.*

*We've given workshops together with government schools. We all empower one another. We give each other a hand.*

There had also been cases of parents using the skills gained at the workshops to obtain employment.

*One super-quiet woman at (an outback town) came along for the three days, got her certificate for completing the workshop and then said, I'm going to apply for a teacher aide job. The next day she went in to the principal with the certificate and got the job. So that woman went from absolutely not saying anything on the first day of the workshop, of being terrified, to getting that job.*

*A woman who did the Darwin workshop, as a result of what that did for her, got a new job running a community youth assistance program.*

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