

What parents say about teachers, schools
and family-school partnerships



Family-School
& Community
Partnerships
Bureau



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Prepared for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau by Brenton Holmes (edited by Jacqueline Gellatly and Caz Bosch).

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PO BOX 3910 WESTON CREEK ACT AUSTRALIA 2611



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Executive Summary

The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau conducted a series of focus groups with parents of school age children in 2009. The purpose of these was to find out how parents viewed the quality of teachers and teaching, the effectiveness of schools and the education system, and the nature of the relationships between schools and parents.

The parents in this study felt passionately about their children emerging from their school years as well rounded human beings. They expressed the need for schools to provide a safe environment for their children, and to take on a significant role in their socialisation as well as their intellectual development.

This group of parents wanted their children to feel valued, nurtured and respected in the school environment. In essence, they felt that children would thrive in school if they were happy and had a good relationship with their teacher. It followed, then, that some key attributes of a quality teacher were linked to strong interpersonal and communication skills.

Other skills and attributes of a quality teacher were considered to be a love of working with children and being able to engage them effectively, being well prepared, providing an orderly classroom and catering for the various needs and abilities of students, and being accessible and responsive to parents.

Quality schools, and in particular principals, are expected to reach out to parents and families, striving to maintain open communication, a sense of welcome, and a ready and respectful responsiveness to parents concerns.

Lack of adequate funding for schools and teachers to effectively do all that is required of them was the key concern raised by the focus group participants in terms of the education system as a whole. This also related to the view that while parents highly valued communication between schools and families, they were sympathetic that more was not done due to time and resource constraints.

In general, family-school and community partnerships were viewed in the context of traditional forms of communication such as newsletters and parent teacher interviews.

Parental involvement was largely referred to in the context of helping around the school with activities such as classroom reading, canteen duty, sport clubs and school fairs.

A key learning for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau is that much more needs to be done to raise the awareness of both families and schools about broader concepts of parent involvement, engagement and partnership. Approaching the education of children as a shared responsibility between families and schools has many well researched benefits. However, these benefits can only be realised if the underpinning factors are understood, appreciated and effectively harnessed in relevant policy and practice contexts.



Introduction

The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau (the Bureau) is a collaborative partnership between the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC). It was established in 2008 with funding from the Australian Government, and its key objective is to encourage parents and schools to work together to build parental engagement and community involvement in schools.

The Bureau conducts research about ways to improve relationships between schools, families and the community. The Bureau also identifies where good relationships have been established and shares these best practice case studies. The Bureau promotes the value of parents being closely involved with the education of their children.

In 2009, the Bureau conducted a series of focus groups with parents of school-aged children. The purpose of these was to gain some insights into how parents viewed the quality of teachers and teaching, the effectiveness of schools and the education system, and the nature of the relationships between schools and parents. These insights will be used by the Bureau to help shape its research and information dissemination programs pointing, for example, to the types of projects and materials that parents, teachers, principals and wider school communities may find most useful in fostering productive family-school partnerships.

This report of the focus group outcomes conveys the broad sentiments of parents as they emerged. Many views and issues were remarkably consistent across all groups and these might therefore be extrapolated with some confidence to the wider cohort of Australian parents. Equally, certain opinions arose which could not be considered representative but which have nonetheless been included as they provide distinct perspectives on particular aspects of schooling and of educational policy more broadly.





Methodology

Ten focus groups were held in five states/territories with approximately ten participants in each. Thus a total of around 100 parents - drawn from government and non-government schools, both primary and secondary, in metropolitan and regional centres across three states - participated in the project.

The Bureau invited participation for the focus groups from its network of parent organisations. There was no requirement that participants be regular or active members of a school parent body, but the nature of the exercise meant that those parents who chose to attend the focus groups tended to be already fairly engaged with their child's school – or were keen to be. Therefore those participating in the discussions could not be considered a representative sample of Australian parents with school age children.¹

A strength of this sample group was that most participants had relatively high levels of awareness about the structure and operation of their child's school and so were able to explain and justify their views in terms of direct experience and concrete evidence.

A weakness was that the focus groups could not directly explore the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of parents who, for whatever reason, were not especially engaged with their children's schooling. It is fair to say however, that participants seemed highly attuned to the patchiness of family-school engagement across the wider parent cohort, and felt generally confident that they had a sound appreciation of why many parents were not able to be involved in their children's schooling. Therefore, in an indirect way, participants felt they could provide some indicative sense of the experience and views of those not present.

The set of stimulus questions used in the focus groups can be found in Appendix 1.

Discussion

What parents want for their children

There was a high level of consistency across all focus groups regarding parents' expectations about the kind of person they wished to see emerge from their child's twelve years of schooling.

Broadly speaking, parents want their children to emerge as well-rounded human beings. The most prominent attributes mentioned belong to the moral and social domains. They want their children to be decent human beings, people who are tolerant, and who can relate effectively to a wide range of their fellow citizens.

¹ Where the word 'parents' is used in this paper, it typically refers to the group of parents who participated in the study, not Australian parents in general.



Parents hope for a strong sense of personal agency in their child, as someone who has developed their abilities and skills, and possesses the dispositions – including a love of learning - that will enable them to pursue their life choices. Optimism, confidence, independence, integrity and honesty were frequently cited as desirable attributes.

In terms of what parents wanted for their child during the school years, the overwhelming concern was that their child should be happy at school. Being happy at school is seen primarily as a function of the child's relationship with their teachers, and of the leadership provided by the school principal in creating an ethos of care and an environment in which learning can proceed in an orderly, student-centred manner.

In short, parents seem to regard school as, above all else, a vehicle for the personal development and socialisation of their child. Intellectual and practical skills are very important, but these must be developed in a learning environment that is safe and nurturing, and which promotes the individual child's growth as a distinctive, self-actualising being who nevertheless has a strong sense of being part of, and having responsibilities towards, a community.





What makes a quality teacher?

All focus group participants were keen to talk at length and in depth about teachers, both individually and as a profession.

It is clear that parents regard teachers as the central figures in the education of their children. Parents speak about teachers in very favourable terms, often passionately so, and acknowledge the vital importance of the job they do in preparing young people for life in all its aspects – economic social, personal, cultural. Parents articulate considerable sympathy for teachers in terms of the challenges they face, especially in the context of the level of resources available to them, the status accorded the profession generally, and the variable level of engagement and support between schools and homes.

'It's bloody difficult. It's hard yakka'.

'Teachers have to be a bouncer, a social worker, a facilitator. It's a difficult job'.

'Teachers are learning to do more with less. They keep their head above water, but they're paddling frantically'.

This is not to say that parents believe all teachers are wonderful. On the contrary, the focus groups consistently acknowledged that in every school there are some teachers who do not perform as well as they should. But parents seem universally inclined to highlight the shortcomings of 'the system', of funding levels, of teacher training, of political support and other factors before directing blame at the shortcomings of individual teachers.

There was a remarkable consistency across all focus groups around what parents required of teachers and the attributes that they felt were needed in order to be a good teacher.

Notably, discussion about what makes a good teacher almost always immediately coalesced around the interpersonal aspects of teaching. The most common initial remark from parents was that they wanted the teacher to establish a good relationship with their child.

This was typically elaborated in terms of the teacher being able to adapt to the child, to be genuinely caring about the child's wellbeing – in both educational and personal terms. Talk of 'nurture' and 'care' was prominent. Words like 'approachable', 'good rapport', 'flexible', 'fair' and 'kind' were typical of the descriptors that parents offered in their opening statements about what made a good teacher.

Any attempts by teachers to assert their authority by loud or harsh words, or behaviours that intimidated students or undermined their sense of self-worth were universally deplored. A sense of humour was seen to be imperative.

Parents place very high value on teachers being passionate about their work and genuinely liking young people. The development of respectful relationships between teacher and student was a prominent theme in the discussions.



Focus group participants were consistently fair-minded in that they recognised the importance of their own child's responsibility to play their part in helping to establish good relationships with their teachers, but it was very clear that parents expected teachers to be pro-active and conscientious in building relationships with their children.

The most commonly mentioned and keenly pressed requirements for being a good teacher were being 'a good communicator' and being 'able to engage the students'. This was elaborated largely in terms of personal qualities - especially enthusiasm - and sometimes with reference to pedagogical skills such as orderly but flexible instruction that provided learning experiences to match the student's existing level of knowledge. Parents generally conceded that good teachers were not all of the same personality type and not necessarily all effervescent in their style of communication, but good teachers were nevertheless able to convey their enthusiasm for their subject and their job in ways that students found engaging and inspiring.

As a factor in teacher quality, the issue of subject knowledge did not emerge as often nor as spontaneously as a teacher's need to be passionate about their teaching, to be enthusiastic in the classroom, and to demonstrate a love of working with young people. Parents seem to take it for granted, especially in the secondary school environment, that teachers possess the level of subject matter expertise required to deliver the curriculum, and to meet the academic requirements at the various year levels.

The strong requirement that teachers attend to the student as a 'whole person' prompted occasional comments to the effect that teachers should not just 'teach to the test'. There were also occasional references to the fact that teachers were sometimes expected to teach in areas outside their own subject discipline, and this was a matter both of perplexity and concern for parents. Parents said that students were very quick to identify a teacher's subject knowledge limitations when teaching outside their specialist area.

The standard of teacher training and the quality of candidates entering teacher preparation courses drew relatively little comment in the focus groups. There was some concern that teacher preparation programs did not provide for sufficient practical exposure to classroom teaching, and that there should be more systematic mentoring of young teachers. Reference was sometimes made to countries such as Finland and Denmark where teachers required Masters degrees, and where there was a substantial level of mentoring and coaching of teachers during their early years in the profession.

Ideas such as teachers' sabbaticals were floated as a partial solution to the perceived shift away from the notion of teaching as a vocation to that of a job to be undertaken for a short period before other life options were pursued. Participants seemed to generally approve of mature entrants entering the profession with general life-skills and broader work experience under their belt.

'Respect' and 'mutual respect' were frequently cited by focus group participants as key features of quality teaching. It was generally perceived that traditional notions of respect as the default attitude that should be displayed towards teachers and other authority figures have waned. Respect is something that has to be earned by a teacher on a continuing basis.



On the other hand, respect is something that parents expect teachers to extend to their children as the starting point for building a relationship.

Those same parents, however, also expect their own children to adopt a respectful attitude towards teachers as a default position. The participants often cited the importance of parental input when it comes to students' dispositions towards teachers, and in helping students to think and act maturely and responsibly about their relationships with teachers.

A topic frequently raised in the context of quality teaching was that of the teacher's capacity to manage classroom behaviour. A good teacher ensures an orderly and equitable learning environment. It was not uncommon to hear parents refer to the fact that a particular teacher knew their subject matter well, was a decent person, and seemed to be conscientious in their work, but could not control disruptive students. There seems to be a widely held view amongst parents that behaviour management issues do not receive the attention that they deserve.

In expressing their concerns for the impact of disruptive behaviour on their own children's learning, the parents in the focus groups generally displayed considerable sympathy for teachers, and lamented the lack of support – both structurally and operationally – that was available to teachers. Comments typically referred to the diversity of abilities within any classroom, the lack of parental engagement in the resolution of problems, a perceived increase in the frequency of students displaying cognitive or behavioural problems, and the gross inadequacy of specialised support staff such as counsellors or teacher aides.





Focus group participants frequently volunteered comments to the effect that, while it was important for students experiencing difficulties to receive the teacher's attention, this was usually at the expense of the bulk of the other students. The 'felt' consequence was that the majority of compliant and generally competent students received sub-optimal consideration, and the most able students were rarely extended or challenged.

There was a strong sense of frustration in most of the focus groups about the lack of resources available to teachers in schools to address behavioural issues and the requirements of students with special needs. The issue of under-resourcing of schools was a frequent and passionately discussed topic, with parents from both government and non-government school sectors expressing considerable dissatisfaction. This matter is dealt with in more detail below.

In the context of discussing what makes a quality teacher, focus group participants only occasionally raised the question of how well a teacher communicated with parents about the child's progress. Parents expect that if a significant matter arises in relation to their child's education or personal situation, the school will get in touch with them. When teachers initiate contact with a parent, the parent is invariably grateful, but it seems there is a general acceptance that communication with teachers, especially beyond primary school, will largely remain a five minute encounter at a designated parent-teacher night.

A teacher who is assiduous at acting upon and following up either problems or opportunities for students is highly valued by parents, but broadly speaking, parents' sympathy for teachers extends to making considerable allowances around expecting them to have direct or regular communication with parents.

Because parents regard teachers as operating under a lot of pressure, and being responsible for large numbers of students, they generally consider it unfair as well as unrealistic to expect teachers to liaise with parents about each individual child's progress. The broader aspects of home-school communications are explored in more detail later in this report.

Focus group participants only occasionally raised the issue of competence with modern digital technologies as a discrete element of what a quality teacher requires. Where raised, it was done so in the context of comments about teacher training, ongoing professional development, school infrastructure and sometimes in relation to how teachers engaged students in learning. Discussion of digital technologies arose more frequently in the context of home-school communications.

Broadly speaking, parents consider that if their child is happy in school – and this is in large part a function of their relationships with their teachers - then the child will learn effectively. To the extent that teaching is about enabling students to learn, quality teaching is significantly about creating an environment in which the student feels valued and respected, and where there is open and frequent communication between teacher and student.



Parents recognise that these conditions are not solely dependent upon the nature and professionalism of the individual teacher, but also upon the ethos of the school and the kind of leadership provided by the principal and executive team. This is explored in more detail below.

In summary, the focus group participants considered a quality teacher to be someone with the following skills and attributes:

- § genuinely enjoys working with young people and is committed to developing optimal relationships with each student
- § communicates openly and respectfully with students, deals fairly with them and demonstrates concern for their overall wellbeing
- § recognises the individual strengths and weaknesses of students, and as far as possible adapts their teaching to meet individual needs and learning styles
- § has high expectations of students and conveys confidence in their capacity to achieve educational and personal goals
- § is knowledgeable and passionate about the subjects they teach, and displays enthusiasm and energy in sharing that knowledge and passion with students
- § is able to create an orderly classroom environment, and address the special requirements of higher needs students without significantly limiting attention to the rest of the class
- § demonstrates professional competence in assessing and reporting on students' subject knowledge and academic progress and uses that information to improve learning
- § keeps up-to-date in their subject discipline, teaching methods and developments in technology
- § is accessible and responsive to parents, and where necessary takes the initiative to consult with parents about their child's progress
- § knows how to garner appropriate support and resources to supplement their own efforts as a teacher or to assist students who are struggling
- § has benefited from a well-designed teacher preparation program and has access to ongoing professional development.



What makes a quality school and education system?

Most focus group participants declared that it was possible to tell whether a school was a quality institution from the moment you entered it. Factors ranged from the physical appearance of a school, to the welcoming nature of the front office reception, to the general mood and behaviour of students. School ethos, it seems, is a major consideration when it comes to parents' assessment of a school's overall quality.

The principal

It is generally agreed that quality schooling 'starts at the top'. Parents regard the principal as the person who 'sets the tone' of the school and the person most directly responsible for building good relationships between the school, families and the community. The principal is vital to staff morale and the promotion of quality teaching, is the role model for the kinds of relationships expected between teachers, students and parents, and a key figure in determining the school's reputation.

While most focus group participants spoke favourably of their current school principal, there was general acknowledgement that the quality of principals varied from time to time and from school to school. Thus while many were perceived as forward-looking and keen to engage with families and communities, some were considered to view their role as one of manager/administrator rather than educational leader and community engager.

Further to this, participants placed considerable emphasis on the responsiveness of a principal when it came to their expressing concerns about matters relating to their child. In some instances they reported defensiveness from a principal, but their strongest criticism was reserved for those occasions when they encountered what they felt was 'bureaucratic obstruction' on the part of the principal and/or an overarching educational authority.

Generally speaking, parents applauded the readiness of principals to address any concerns, and were broadly satisfied with the hearing they received, even in those circumstances where a concern could not be fully resolved or a request accommodated. Focus group participants conceded that, as already relatively engaged parents, they were more confident about approaching the school with a complaint than many other parents might be.

Participants emphasised the importance of the school and its principal being proactive in encouraging parental input, and ensuring that any approaches from parents were dealt with promptly and sympathetically.

Parents expect the principal to embrace, articulate and implement a strong set of values that can flow through to staff and students, and is palpable to the wider community. They hold the principal accountable for staff morale. The principal must be an effective broker of relationships between the school, parents, the community and the education bureaucracy. To be successful in this arena, the principal must be able to speak in jargon-free language. The best principals, for some parents at least, are those who are very proactive in seeking engagement with families, even to the extent of going out and knocking on doors.



The system

Focus group participants were not generally familiar with the structure and operations of education systems or departments, and did not readily distinguish between state and federal government responsibilities except to the extent of commenting on activity under the Rudd government's Education Revolution initiatives.

There was, however, a general appreciation among participants of the particular role played by the Australian Government in providing funding support to non-government schools. Parents were uniformly of the view that there is a large gap between all governments' rhetoric about the importance of education and the level of taxpayers' money that governments are prepared to devote to it.

The education system or department was commonly spoken of in terms of a bureaucracy, in the sense of its being perceived as something that impeded rather than facilitated quality schooling. Such comments usually arose as anecdotes about failed attempts by parents or principals to have matters resolved satisfactorily when those issues had to be referred 'up the line' to departmental officials.

Parents appeared to be somewhat familiar with moves to establish a national curriculum for Australian schools, and regarded this as a positive step. Some parents, however, complained that education authorities seemed to introduce curriculum and structural or procedural changes hastily, without proper regard for consultation, sound planning, timeframes for implementation, relevant teacher professional development, and without clear advice to parents and the public about the implications and impacts of those changes.

Resources

Most of the comments regarding the quality of schools turned on the question of resourcing, which was universally regarded as inadequate. There was a general consensus that, on the whole, principals and teachers were doing the best they could under trying conditions. That government schools were chronically under-funded was a perception widely shared by parents from both the government and non-government school sectors. Moreover, criticism of this state of affairs was both frequent and vociferous.

As indicated earlier, concerns about inadequate funding arose primarily in the context of a perceived gross under-provision of support for teachers in managing disruptive students or managing the learning of students with special needs.

Focus group participants seemed keenly aware of the diversity of students in a typical school classroom and the demands that this placed upon teachers.

Parents also felt that the sheer numbers of students to which teachers had to attend, both in the classroom and in follow-up activities such as marking assignments, organising visits and writing reports, placed enormous pressure on teachers.



They considered that governments and education authorities failed to appreciate what was needed to ensure that teachers could teach effectively and schools could deliver quality education.

One focus group, comprising parents from a non-government secondary school, described their school as a model of quality. They explained this in terms of relatively small student numbers, effective teachers, good relationships with families and the community, and a very competent leadership team. They considered the fees they paid to be modest. It emerged from discussion that the school had made very firm decisions about such things as:

- § the range and nature of the curriculum it would offer so that a balance between choice and depth could be maintained
- § appointing well-qualified teachers with diverse backgrounds and teaching styles
- § providing onsite support staff by way of student counsellors, advisers, and teacher aides so that 'teachers were allowed to get on with teaching'
- § giving the principal and leadership team the time and space to plan, reflect, monitor curriculum changes, mentor and develop staff, and engage with parents and the community.

Such an account appears consistent with what parents generally identified as the ingredients for a quality school and the need for resourcing levels that are commensurate with enabling teachers and principals to do their jobs well.

One parent from the group, expressing his belief that quality schools existed in both government and non-government school sectors, acknowledged the relative privilege of his own children's educational experience. 'This school should be a normal school, not an exceptional school', the parent said. 'By fortunate circumstances we are able to afford a school like this, but that's not what everyone can enjoy. But isn't it the issue that we all should at least strive for that?'

Many parents declared a preparedness to pay more taxes in order to fund schools more effectively, a sentiment captured eloquently in the remark: 'I'd be prepared to pay a lot more taxes so that I didn't have to man the barbecue at Bunnings!' Such sentiments were shared by parents from both government and non-government sectors.

'A well-resourced school means that people can get on with what they're meant to do, get on and teach our children. That's what 99.9% of Australians want ... Understand that we want [governments] to put money into our schools, pay the teachers better, make sure they have [working arrangements] that reflect the professional standards that they have to maintain. We as taxpayers are prepared to fund it. I don't care if the Defence Force is a billion dollars short next year, or there are a few less public servants in town with me. We want the money to go where it should be going'.



School-parent communications and family-school partnerships

When it comes to relationships between school and home, parents rate the need for communication highly. In practice the extent and effectiveness of communication varies greatly, as do the expectations of parents about their participation in school decision-making processes. Parents like to regard themselves as partners in their children's education, but many appear to be uncertain about what such partnerships entail, and how they can make their most effective contribution.

School-home communications

Parents continue to value 'the regular newsletter' – which for most schools remains a paper-based communication, conveyed by students to their families with varying degrees of success.

This is not to deny that significant efforts are being made by many schools to greatly enhance their communication practices, including by greater openness to the presence of parents in the school, more regular appointments and, in some cases by the development of email lists, SMS alerts and sophisticated websites. But the majority of schools are a long way from establishing regular and effective networks of general communication between the school and the home, let alone more direct and frequent engagement between teachers and parents as partners in education.

Participants in the focus groups entertained different imaginings about the state of their school's communications infrastructure and practices, and as a consequence held varying expectations of the school when it comes to liaising with and responding to parents. For instance, some parents assumed that all teachers have their own work station with computer and telephone access, giving rise to the expectation that parents should be able to readily exchange emails with teachers, or arrange a phone conversation. The reality in many schools, however, is that teacher access to computers and phones is extremely limited and calls to mobile phones are highly regulated making timely and easy communication with families difficult.

Other parents, sympathetic to the pressures and lack of resources plaguing their school, know the difficulties involved in communicating beyond the school, and consider it unfair, for example, to expect teachers to report to families regularly by email on each of their many students. Such parents are disappointed, but not surprised, when school websites don't contain up-to-date information about what's happening in their child's class.

Consistent with the prevailing ad hoc rather than systematic approach to family-school liaison and engagement, the application of digital technologies to communications with parents often relies on the enthusiasm and commitment of a particular teacher or principal within the school. When that person moves on, initiatives flounder. It would seem that relatively few schools have been able to establish a robust technical maintenance scheme to support digital communications, and this undermines the efforts of even its most ardent proponents, whether these are teachers or parents.



Nevertheless, the increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies may have the effect of nudging schools and families into closer communication, both by establishing simpler and more accessible lines of communication, and by virtue of the fact that homes - being generally more technologically well-endowed than schools - have the potentially bigger role to play in providing students with access to the resources they need for their studies.

Parental involvement in schools and their children's learning

A consistent theme among focus group participants was the need for schools to be welcoming places for parents. There was frequent mention of the importance of the front office staff in affecting the comfort levels of parents approaching the school. Some schools make a deliberate effort to create a space in the school where parents can congregate.

One parent explained how their child's school had an informal entrance for parents so that they could choose not to enter through the main office. This was seen to be particularly helpful for parents who felt reticent or intimidated, or whose cultural norms were not readily accommodated by the way the school operated.

The disposition of a school's principal is clearly a major factor in a school's connection with its community, and with parents in particular. Focus group participants found principals to be generally approachable and responsive, but not universally so. Parents stressed the fact that when they were listened to by a school principal they felt valued. Some said it was important that principals used jargon-free language when interacting with parents, and acknowledged in a genuine way both the parent's desire for involvement in their children's learning but also the limitations of that parental involvement.

It seems clear that the institutional nature of schools, and the memories and assumptions that many parents attach to schools, is an impediment to parents involving themselves more directly with their child's school. In this respect, primary schools are much more effective than secondary schools in breaking down barriers. Indeed there was frequent reference by focus group participants to the significant changes in parental engagement that were associated with transition to high school. This is explored in more detail below.

Focus group participants tended to regard parental involvement very much in terms of a physical presence in the classroom, membership of parent groups, participation in working bees, helping out with canteens, sports teams and the like. The notion of broader parental involvement in their child's 'learning' - as opposed to their 'schooling' - was limited to occasional references about the importance of creating a supportive home environment for study, or assistance with homework. This is discussed in the later section on 'parental responsibilities on the home front'.

Participants expressed the view that there was a widespread belief in the community that schools have the prime responsibility for educating children and that parents and families play a more subordinate role. Clearly, not all participants in this study held this view themselves.



Some parents recognised that certain schools have made enormous efforts to build and sustain effective partnerships with families, while many others still have a long way to go.

It became increasingly clear across the focus groups that the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau has much work to do in terms of supporting parents, teachers, schools and the wider education community to understand the well researched benefits of parental involvement/engagement in children's learning and the positive impact this has on educational attainment and general life preparedness. The body of research has certain limitations but, even so, the case for building understanding and action around the positive influence of parental engagement is compelling:

Whether construed as home-based behaviours (e.g. helping with homework), school based activities (e.g. attending school events), or parent-teacher communication (e.g. talking with the teacher about homework), parental involvement has been positively linked to indicators of student achievement, including teacher ratings of student competence, student grades, and achievement test scores ... Involvement has also been associated with other indicators of school success, including lower rates of retention in grade, lower drop-out rates, higher on-time high school graduation rates, and higher rates of participation in advanced courses ... [it] has also been linked to psychological processes and attributes that support student achievement ... [including] student sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning ("I *can* do this work"), mastery orientation, perceptions of personal control over school outcomes, self-regulatory knowledge and skills ("I know *how* to do this work"), as well as attentive, adaptive school behaviour, engagement in schoolwork, and beliefs about the importance of education ("I *want* to do this work").²

Focus group participants seemed largely unaware of any policies their local school may have had – or not had- regarding how they aim to work with parents as partners in their children's education. It followed that participants were not familiar with the *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), the purpose of which is to encourage and guide schools, school systems, parent groups and families to develop family-school partnerships.³

Parent organisations

Because many focus group participants were either directly involved in, or loosely connected with, their school's parent body, there was frequent reference to the fact that most parents in their school communities did not want to be involved in the traditional things schools sought to involve them in.

² Hoover-Dempsey, K., Walker, J., Sandler, H., Whetsel, D., Green, C., Wilkins, A. & Closson, K. (2005). 'Why do parents become Involved? Research findings and implications', *The Elementary School Journal*, vol. 106, no. 2, pp. 105-130.

³ The *Family-School Partnerships Framework* was developed by the Australian Parents Council (APC), the Australian Council of State School Organisations, the Australian Government and other key stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).



It seems that parents are much more inclined to be present at the school when there is an activity or occasion that relates directly to their child's learning. For example, celebrations of student achievement, information evenings about new curriculum initiatives, practical sessions about technology, or learning opportunities for parents themselves that relate directly to their own child's course of study, are much better attended than Parents & Citizens meetings or activities related to school governance, policy or decision-making. In short, busy parents make careful choices about how they will spend their precious time.

Outside of their own school parent body, focus group participants had limited awareness of the wider dimensions of parent organisations and their representational role at regional, state and national levels. This limited awareness and the fact that parents are highly focused on the immediate needs of their child and their school, means that they are usually reluctant to become involved in parent associations and unaware of the benefits they offer.

Other family-school issues

In the course of discussion concentrating on the quality of teachers and schools, focus group participants frequently raised other issues they believed merited consideration in the context of improving the schooling experience. Two such issues were primary-secondary transitioning and parental responsibilities at home.

Transition

Transition between primary and secondary school was raised as an issue of concern to parents in several focus groups, and one in which school principals had an important role to play.

Broadly speaking, parents feel reasonably well connected with their child's primary school, and enjoy some sense of partnership with the school in their child's education. However, the changes that occur when the child moves to high school are described by parents in fairly dramatic terms, and parents may feel both a sense of grief at the loss of connection and a sense of bewilderment and uncertainty about their role as their child enters the secondary phase.

While it is mostly accepted that there is an inevitable and necessary 'letting go' between parent and child, and both parent and child tend to adjust to the new arrangements within the first few months of high school, many parents felt that the transition could be handled more effectively in the interests of enabling parents to remain usefully – if differently – engaged with their child's education.

Some suggested that transition programs for students could be complemented by transition programs for parents. If high school principals were to make serious efforts to help parents transition as their child moves to high school, many believe this could cement good relationships between the school and its new families to the long-term benefit of all parties.



Parental responsibilities on the home front

Participants felt that schools are obligated to make genuine efforts to communicate with and involve parents, and some focus group participants tended to refer to the obligations of parents in terms of supporting the school's endeavours.

Several participants contended that the many challenges confronting schools arise in part because parents fail to provide children with the guidance, support and personal qualities that ensure their child's basic readiness for, and capacity to participate in, classroom-based education. The complexities surrounding these perceived parental shortcomings are acknowledged, and there seems to be a broad recognition that support for struggling families during the early childhood years and beyond is an urgent issue.

Some focus group participants stressed the importance of parents' in-home actions and attitudes in conveying to their children that education is to be valued. Providing appropriate conditions for homework, prioritising opportunities for learning in family activities, and modelling good communications were among the parental qualities considered helpful in aligning the values and expectations of school and home.

Such observations are supported by research findings showing that "parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation."⁴

While the view prevailed that trying to draw school and home closer together was generally desirable, some participants noted that, for some students, school was a haven from the chaos or violence at home. In such instances, they considered, it may be preferable to not overly draw parents into the school's dealings with the student so that teachers can develop the requisite levels of trust with the student concerned.

⁴ Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievements and adjustment: a literature review*. Research Report RR433, Department for Education and Skills, UK: Queens Printer.



Conclusion

The parents represented in the focus groups clearly want the best for their children and want to see them reach their full potential. They want their children to flourish in school and are keen themselves to be involved.

They had positive views of most teachers and felt teachers were doing their best, often under difficult circumstances that derived from the lack of appropriate resourcing.

Key elements of what constitutes a quality teacher centred around relevant interpersonal skills: a love of working with children and being able to engage them effectively, being well prepared, providing an orderly classroom and catering for the various needs and abilities of students, and being accessible and responsive to parents.

A quality school was defined as one that is welcoming, has a strong ethos and a principal that provides leadership and engages with the broader school community.

Communication to parents from the school is highly valued by parents. While most parents would like to see more coming from schools and teachers, they recognise that resourcing issues make this difficult.

Parental involvement in schools drew comments mainly about how welcome parents felt in the school. The attitude and accessibility of school principals was viewed as a key factor in this regard.

Parental involvement with their child's learning was conceptualised predominantly in terms of the parent's physical presence in the classroom, helping in the school through working bees, canteen, sporting groups or as members of parent groups.

This said, several participants made the link to the broader role that parents and families play in the ongoing education of their children.

They shared the view that parents have a responsibility to provide their children with guidance and support, and to help them develop those personal qualities that will ensure readiness for, and capacity to participate in, the classroom and school environment.

This included the view that parents should help their children value the importance of education and support this at home with appropriate structures and discussions.

The results of this study will be used by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau to inform future work and the appropriate targeting of information and resources to stakeholders who can benefit from increased knowledge about the positive impact of family-school partnerships and how these can be effectively established, supported and sustained.



The discussions raise awareness that parents, teachers and principals will benefit from having greater access to information about the broader definitions and benefits of parental engagement in children's education.⁵ As well, familiarity with the content of the *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) will assist parents and others to advocate more strongly in their school communities for improved partnership mechanisms, and to more effectively support these as they are planned and implemented.

Parents may also benefit and feel more empowered if they gain access to a more in-depth understanding of the broader roles of parenting organisations and representative bodies. Equally, the information obtained in this project challenges parent organisations to consider further ways to inform parents/families of the work they do and the potential roles that any parent can play.

Teachers have a good take home message from this report in that the focus group participants strongly supported them and had a great deal of sympathy given the demands on the current teaching profession and the impact of insufficient resources.

Teachers will also benefit from greater knowledge of the *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) since it provides a tool to assist them and other school staff to better connect, communicate and collaborate with students and families to improve learning outcomes and build community.

Principal efforts in leading the school community are recognised by this group of parents and, again, the restrictions placed on them by resourcing are recognised. Parents expect principals to demonstrate leadership in welcoming and engaging parents in the school community and placing value on what they can offer. Thus the *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) - first distributed to all schools in 2008 - remains a great resource for principals since it outlines a wide range of strategies that schools can draw on to facilitate effective partnerships.

The clear message for government arising from the discussions is that this group of parents felt strongly and unanimously that our education system, including teaching training and ongoing professional development, needs to be better resourced. Resources to support behaviour management and students with special needs were particularly highlighted.

In addition to the select references listed below, a new online resource will soon be available. Entitled *Strengthening Family and Community Engagement in Student Learning*, this brings together key concepts, research, strategies and case studies in the field and offers a self-assessment tool to enable school communities to reflect on their current processes and practices, and develop individualised action plans. When launched, the Bureau (www.familyschool.org.au) will provide a web link to this valuable resource created by the Smarter Schools National Key Reform Parent Engagement Project Taskforce.

⁵ See, for example, the Family-School & Community Partnership's Bureau's publication [Parent Engagement in Children's Education](#) (2011).



Reading Resources

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Appendix 1: Focus group stimulus questions

1. If I was a new parent coming to this school, and I met you in the supermarket queue and asked you what it is like, what would you say?
2. What do you think a teacher needs to be like, what do they need to do, in order to be a good teacher?
3. Think of a teacher that you think has been particularly good for your child. Describe that teacher.
4. Do you have a sense of what your child thinks is a good teacher?
5. Can we list, and then rank, those attributes that make for a good teacher?
6. How do your child's teachers rate against those attributes and skills that you think are important in teaching?
7. Are you generally happy with the quality of the education that your child is receiving at your school/ through the system?
8. What in your opinion, makes for good quality education?
9. When your child finally emerges from compulsory education at around 16, in broad terms, what kind of qualities or characteristics would you hope the education process had developed in your child?
10. Are you confident that your child will emerge from education reasonably well equipped to get on with life as an adult?
11. Where do you think the balance should lie for schools in developing young people? Should the school focus on children developing skills and knowledge for future study and work, or focus more on developing positive behaviours and attitudes- character, resilience and so on.
12. What do you think the reputation of your school is like in the broader community?
13. How do you feel about the overall physical conditions of the school and the kinds of physical and technological resources that are available to support learning?
14. What do you generally think about the education system in the way it provides what is needed for the development of young people, both skills wise and as citizens?
15. What do you base your assessment of the education system on- your own and your children's experience, media reports, the grapevine?



16. Do you have a sense that *all* parents feel valued or welcome at your school?
17. Do the parents at your school feel involved in their child's schooling, or do they feel a bit on the fringe- canteen and cake stall but not much else?
18. Do you feel able to talk readily to teachers and the principal about any matter related to the school or your child? Are you listened to and helped?
19. How would you prefer that the school communicates with you- by phone? Face to face meeting? Email? Text? Website postings? Is the newsletter enough?
20. How important do you think the home is in helping a child to learn effectively?
21. Do you think your school appreciates the contribution that homes and families make to a child's learning success?
22. Do you feel well supported by the school in your own efforts to make the home a good contributor to your child's learning?
23. When you first walked into your child's school, what did the school feel like to you? What did you notice or sense about it?
24. If the school principal said to you: "What would you like to change about the way this school operates", what would you say?
25. Is your local P&C effective in engaging parents?
26. Do you have a sense of how your P&C fits with broader state or national parent organisations?
27. How familiar are you with the parent organisations locally or at a state and national level?
28. What do you think the role of parent organisations should be?
29. Would you like to be more deeply involved in the decision-making that goes on in your school?