

FAMILY– SCHOOL & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS BUREAU



March Newsletter, 2015

Message from the Bureau

2015 will see the completion of our two current projects "The impact of parental engagement on improved student learning outcomes" and the refinement of the Family-School Partnerships Framework project.

Marg Hunter is heading up "The impact of parental engagement on improved student learning outcomes" project. This research is producing some very interesting data on family engagement in schools which will be shared at the completion of the project. Later this year.

Donna Sirmais is continuing to refine the Family-School Partnerships Framework and has been consulting with Departmental staff, families, schools and community organisations and gathering their feedback on what they require from the Family-School Partnerships Framework and how the Framework can best support their needs.

The Bureau will be out and about in 2015 at various conferences around Australia presenting on Family Engagement in schools. To keep updated on the current developments of our projects and our conference presentations join us on Facebook or Twitter.

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Framework refinement consultations with Parents Victoria, Victorian Parents Council, Victorian Council of School Organisations, Catholic Education Office Melbourne and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, February 2015.

Engagement is more than involvement

Many use the term family engagement while others speak of parent engagement. We use the term family inclusively here to encompass caregivers and other family members. Regardless of which term is used, it is important to recognise that engagement is at the more active end of a participation continuum than is involvement and can be considerably different.

Harris and Goodall (2007) conclude that many schools focus on involving families in various school-based or school-related activities, but emphasise that this constitutes family involvement rather than family engagement.

Family involvement is a common vehicle for bringing teachers and families together in schools. Family involvement programs “tend to be directed by the school and attempt to involve families in school activities and/or teach families specific skills and strategies for teaching and reinforcing school tasks at home”. Typically, families are asked to serve in roles as “audience, spectators, fund raisers, aides and organisers”.

With family involvement, the school continues to set the agenda and determine what roles families are to play within that agenda, the focus is placed on what families can do to help the school realise its intentioned outcomes for children. The viewpoint seems to be one of “seek[ing] to determine what families can do for teachers, rather than what schools and families can do together for children”.

Family engagement, different from family involvement, is an alternative way to bring teachers and families together in schools. The word engagement is defined as “contact by fitting together; ... the meshing of gears”. The implication is that the person ‘engaged’ is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment.

Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005, p. 12-13) suggest the essential difference is that engagement implies: ...enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers’ knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial.

Educators and families create a shared world on the ground of school – a world in which “families knowledge” and teacher knowledge both inform decision-making, the determination of agendas, and the intended outcomes of their efforts for children, families, the community and the school.

Whilst the research on this topic is extensive and provides evidence that family engagement in schooling supports student learning, the need to enhance the capacity of all partners to engage in the development, building and sustaining of these partnerships is crucial.

The Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau is continually promoting useful and effective strategies to enhance partnerships between home and school, through our website www.familyschool.org.au our facebook page and also our twitter account.

Video of the month library

Our video of the month currently contains 18 videos of varying length, which support the enhancement of partnerships. Here is a list of our most recent videos.

What counts, who counts it and who does it help? Associate Professor Joseph Flessa, University of Ontario. In this talk, Joe discusses policy assessments, and the incentives they create, matter. How are schools’ efforts to engage families & communities typically evaluated, by whom, and with what impact? Attendance numbers at school-convened meetings or the size of the bottom line after a fundraiser are frequently used, but they’re probably better understood as proxies for a school’s socioeconomic location than for its efforts to thoughtfully engage parents.

Why family engagement is important: This video is an animated video produced by the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau and describes the need to recognise the valuable learning experiences that occur with the home and community and also the professional knowledge and expertise that our teaching staff possess and how the combining of two benefits children and young people.

Schools, TAFE and families partnering in learning for sustainability: This video produced by the Bureau highlights how schools can work with external organisations and families on topics to better communities and learning.

Linking family engagement to learning: In this video Dr Karen Mapp describes the five conditions required when designing family engagement initiatives. Go to <http://www.familyschool.org.au/resources/videos-month> for these and more videos of the month.

Want to read more on family engagement but don't have the time. Take a look at our compilation of research abstracts of national and International research

Parents' Involvement in Their Children's Education (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008, AUS).

Successful Home-School Partnerships (Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2008, NZ).

Why Fathers Matter to their Children's Literacy (Clark, 2009, UK).

The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003, UK).

Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement. Do parents Know They Matter? (Harris & Goodall, 2007, UK)

Why Do Parents Become Involved? Research Findings and Implications (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005, USA)

Parent Engagement and Leadership (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, Canada).

Beyond Random Acts: family, school and community engagement as an integral part of education reform. (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010, USA).

Breaking New Ground: data systems transform family engagement in education. (Weiss, Lopez & Stark, 2011, USA).

And more.....

Go to <http://familieschool.org.au/index.php/what-we-do/research/original-bureau-research/parent-engagement-research-abstracts/>



Family engagement in practice

Schools and families experience a multitude of experiences when it comes to family engagement in schools. Some great, some we always feel could be enhanced. It's no secret that the family engagement continuum is a journey with many twists and turns and everyone at different points along the journey. Many approaches to facilitate engagement are targeted and enhance partnerships others can be ad hoc, and often are time and resource consuming without a great deal of benefit to schools, families and most importantly, students.

The national Family-School Partnerships Framework recognises the varying degree of engagement schools and families face and takes a strategic approach to family engagement which schools can embed in their daily practices. The Framework has seven key guiding dimensions, schools and families can work within to improve student learning through family engagement practices. In this issue of our newsletter we are discussing **Consultative Decision Making** and highlighting a strategy some schools are using to enhance engagement and strengthen partnerships

Regardless of your schools or families previous experiences with family engagement in school, the commencement of a new school year always presents new opportunities and a fresh start. One area of focus for the new year could be consultative decision making practices. Consultative decision making can be a two pronged approach. There is much talk of this within the school improvement agenda however a majority of the conversation has centred around decision making at a whole school level. Whilst we all agree this is a core component of school improvement and management, consultative decision making is also key to student improvement and can be approached through enhancing the capacity of families and teachers to engage in conversations which are directly linked to their child's learning, for example.

Many schools, with a purpose to enhance their family engagement practices are opting out on the traditional mass open nights at the beginning of the year and choosing to facilitate opportunities for one on one conversations with a purpose of getting an in depth understanding of their students and ensuring everyone is of the same understanding of where the student currently sits within their learning journey, what the school is implementing to move the student forward and finally strategies that families can support at home to assist with the students learning goals.

These conversation are based on student data and give teachers the opportunity to maintain or establish relationships with families, get to know their students better, enhance family's understandings of expectations of their child and his or her learning and confirmation of what is either already being done at home which supports learning or what can be extended on.

Volunteers in the classroom

It's that time of year again when we look at the participation component of family engagement in our classrooms.

Here's some practical tips to think about when planning to ask for volunteers in our schools.

One of the things that can discourage volunteers is arriving at school to discover they aren't needed or aren't sure what to do or understand school structure and expectations of working in a school. Many volunteers report that they feel more in the way and didn't know what was required of them.

We all know how busy schools and teachers are, however a little time given to these 3 steps at the beginning can reap rewards further down the track and improve success.

1. Whole school approach: Plan an induction workshop for all volunteers, this could include Work Health and Safety and Code of Conduct information and reading and listening tips such as prompt, pause, praise. Working with children applications could also be filled in at this time.

2. Classroom approach: When possible keep volunteers on the same activity for one term, explain the requirements of the activity and swap to a different activity for the next term. This not only minimises time spent on explaining what is required but also enhances the skills of the volunteer by consolidating their understanding of the activity throughout the term.

3. Whole school and classroom approach: Show your appreciation for your volunteers. Let them know that you and your students value their contributions, even if the contribution is small. Small gestures can grow into large relationships if nurtured. This is a surefire way to grow your volunteer pool and keep them returning to assist in the classroom.

Helpful hint to build your volunteer pool across the school: Members of our school community have a great deal of funds of knowledge. If you are a family member you may like to let your school know of your interests and hobbies and offer your services. If you are a teacher or school you may like to conduct an audit of your families and find out what their hobbies and interests are. This can be the act as register for other events at the school at a later date in which you can partner with your community to support learning outcomes.



1. Tap into the interests of parents.
2. Break down the teacher/non-teacher barrier by allowing for activities that are not directly education-related.
3. Use personal contact. It is the most effective form of communication.
4. Communicate, communicate, communicate.
5. Be a venue for, and agent of, parental self-growth.
6. Ask for, and value, the opinion of families outside the formal school structures.
7. Create an environment that encourages family autonomy.
8. Emphasise the connection with the child's education.
9. Go out of your way to make families feel welcome and valued.
10. Build bridges across cultural and language divides.
11. Be sensitive to families' sensibilities.
12. Be prepared to engage in the capacity-building of both staff and families.
13. Show leadership, be visible and available.
14. Be realistic, patient, and a bit brave.
15. Make it clear you think of families as genuine partners.
16. Don't be frightened to ask families to help solve big problems.
17. Open your mind to families' needs and attitudes.
18. Appoint a family/community liaison person to the staff.
19. Create a place that families can call their own.
20. Acknowledge and celebrate families' input.