



# In Their Words

ACT Schools Share Their Parent Engagement Practice, June 2017



**ARACY**

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth  
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ACT

# In Their Words: ACT Schools Share Their Parent Engagement Practice

Families ACT

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## Acknowledgements

ARACY and Families ACT would like to expressly thank the ACT schools that participated in this project. We appreciate their valuable contribution and commitment to sharing the stories of their diverse school communities.

### A note on scope:

ARACY and Families ACT acknowledge that the scope of this project allowed for the inclusion of only a limited sample of schools, and does not reflect the work of independent and Catholic schools. Further research would benefit from the inclusion of all school sectors (government, independent and Catholic), and would ideally invite all ACT schools to participate.

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## About Families ACT

Families ACT is a peak body supporting organisations working with children, young people and families in the ACT and surrounding region.

Families ACT has a strong policy and advocacy focus, and funds one research project each year that is identified as a priority issue for our local community. This project is a response to the report of the Expert Panel on Students with Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour, also referred to as the Shaddock Report. Families ACT wanted to support the report's recommendation that schools need to work not just with the student, but with the family as a whole.

In 2016 Families ACT commissioned the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to research and document examples of effective parent engagement in ACT schools by capturing and sharing exemplar case studies.

Families ACT, noting ARACY's work with the ACT Directorate of Education to progress parental engagement in ACT schools, pursued this project with ARACY to ensure that local examples of good practice in parent engagement could be captured and shared.

In light of the importance of partnerships between families and schools to promote learning outcomes for students, it is hoped that the selection of examples contained in this document will provide a valuable tool to support schools in their parent engagement endeavours.

Will Mollison  
Executive Officer, Families ACT

June 2017

## About ARACY and Parent Engagement in the ACT

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national, not-for-profit organisation which aims to enhance the futures of children and young people in Australia. As a member-based organisation ARACY collaborates with its partners to achieve a shared purpose – improving child and youth wellbeing in Australia (0-24 years) on the basis of evidence and through collective action.

Since 2014 ARACY has worked with the ACT Directorate of Education to progress a parental engagement strategy in ACT schools. A comprehensive program of research has led to a strong evidence base to support parental engagement in ACT schools in order to enhance the partnerships between families and schools, and help promote children's learning and wellbeing outcomes in both primary and high school settings. The body of work produced by ARACY for the *Progressing Parental Engagement in the ACT* project is publicly available<sup>1</sup>.

A key aspect of this previous work is a definition of parental engagement in children's learning. This definition provides guidance for policy and practice, and the basis for the development of a shared understanding of parental engagement between families, schools and administrators.

Parental engagement is a key part of promoting and ensuring children's learning and wellbeing. It involves two key factors that work in collaboration: family-led learning and family-school partnerships. Family-led learning involves developing a home situation in which families work together to create an environment of learning, collaboration and positive wellbeing. This is supported by the second factor, family-school partnerships. These are built around positive parent-teacher relationships that focus on mutual communication and support (Fox & Olsen, 2014). These relationships work to further enhance and develop family-led learning and therefore improve children's outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/education-capital-act> and <http://www.education.act.gov.au/parental-engagement>

## 1. Introduction

The report of the Expert Panel on Students With Complex Needs and Challenging Behaviour, also referred to as the Shaddock Report, recommended that in responding to these children's needs, schools need to work not just with the student, but with the family as a whole.

It is the vision of both ARACY and Families ACT that the case studies contained here will support schools and related organisations to enhance their parent engagement efforts, thereby supporting improved outcomes for students and their families in the ACT.

### 1.1 Methodology

Case studies were sought from a small number of ACT public schools nominated for participation in the project by their School Network Leaders (SNLs). An invitation letter was sent to the principals of the (n=16) nominated schools and those who accepted the invitation to be involved were provided with a case study template (see Appendix).

The template was designed to elicit schools' experiences of effective parent engagement practices, and included specific areas of investigation around:

- overarching philosophies or culture in relation to parent engagement
- key strategies and approaches in place across the school
- practical examples of parent engagement successfully in action
- enablers or critical success factors to parent engagement
- strategies used to sustain and enhance parent engagement.

The case studies were produced by schools between Term 4, 2016 and Term 1, 2017, with a total of nine (9) schools participating in the project, comprising four Early Childhood Schools (ECSs), four primary schools, and one high school. The participating schools were:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Isabella Plains ECS</li><li>• Lyons ECS</li><li>• Narrabundah ECS</li><li>• Southern Cross ECS</li><li>• Ainslie School</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bonython Primary School</li><li>• Charles Weston Primary School</li><li>• Macquarie Primary School</li><li>• Alfred Deakin High School</li></ul>
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Participating schools frequently commented that the process had taken considerable time and resources to complete, but felt that it had provided a valuable opportunity for the school to reflect on their practice – an important task that isn't always given the attention it deserves. Some schools noted their pride at having been nominated by their

SNL, and understood this to reflect acknowledgement of their school's success in areas relevant to the project.

Case studies went through a validation process, whereby ARACY researchers visited each school to conduct brief interviews with relevant staff, such as the principal or deputy principal, educators and community coordinators, and to gather interesting anecdotes and photos to supplement the parent engagement narrative of that school's case study.

## 1.2 Epstein's 'Keys to Successful Partnerships' Framework

This study was informed by Dr Joyce Epstein's 'Keys to Successful Partnerships' framework, as presented in the *Progressing Parental Engagement School Fact Sheet: Building a strong culture of parent-school engagement* (ACT Directorate of Education, 2015).

### Six types of parent engagement

<b>Type 1 – Parenting</b>	Helping families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students  These strategies also assist schools to better understand families
<b>Type 2 – Communicating</b>	Designing effective two-way communications between school and parents to engage all parents regularly
<b>Type 3 – Volunteering</b>	Recruiting volunteer parents to help in school, in classes and in extra-curricular activities
<b>Type 4 – Learning at home</b>	Providing good information to enable all parents to help with homework and offer other family learning activities
<b>Type 5 – Decision Making</b>	Strategies that include families and community members as partners in school decisions to build a sense of ownership, including being involved in governance
<b>Type 6 – Collaboration with Community</b>	Finding and using resources and services from the wider parent community to enrich school life

Epstein's framework was developed in 1995, and is a respected typology that continues to be regularly cited and utilised. The handbook in which it first appeared is now in its third edition (Epstein, et. al. 2009). Epstein's framework provides useful illustrations of how schools can engage with parents across six types of involvement: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making and Collaborating with Community.

Epstein's framework formed the basis of the template that was distributed to participating schools to assist the development of their case studies. This then ensured that the information was gathered in such a way as to allow for analysis and comparison within an established, consistent structure.

## 2. Introducing the case study schools

Nine ACT public schools participated in the study. Their case studies are contained in the following pages. A companion report to these case studies, *Parent Engagement in ACT Schools: Good Practice Case Studies Report*, is also available. It presents an analysis of the approaches contained within the case studies, and a set of issues for consideration by schools wanting to maximise their parent engagement efforts for the benefit of students. This report is available from both Families ACT and ARACY.

- ▶ **Isabella Plains Early Childhood School:** Isabella Plains ECS is in its ninth year of operation. In partnership with Communities@Work, the school provides education and care services for children from birth to eight years of age. It also provides a range of family programs that aim to support the wellbeing of children and families. As an early childhood school, Isabella Plains focuses on three core outcomes: high quality learning, integrated service delivery, and family support and participation.
- ▶ **Lyons Early Childhood School:** Lyons ECS aims to foster parent engagement that enhances learning for children in all areas of development. It does this by offering a nurturing environment in which every parent is valued, respected and encouraged to reach their full potential. The school promotes joined-up approaches to learning and development between home and school, working together with parents to build capable, competent young learners.
- ▶ **Narrabundah Early Childhood School:** Narrabundah ECS operates as an integrated service model which places the rights and needs of children and their families at the centre. Families have access to a comprehensive array of programs that support children's early learning thus building family and community capacity. Services from different government and community agencies (e.g. education, child care, health programs and family support) are linked so that each child and family has easy access to services and programs when required.
- ▶ **Southern Cross Early Childhood School:** As an early childhood school, Southern Cross ECS works together with the community to develop every child to become a successful lifelong learner. The school's focus is on developing a thriving school community where staff and families openly work as willing partners, and a safe,

inclusive setting where the strengths and needs of all members of the school community are recognised, respected and valued.

- ▶ **Ainslie School:** Ainslie is one of Canberra's oldest public schools, with a connected and diverse parent community. A quarter of its students speak English as an Alternative Language or Dialect and this is drawn on as strength in classrooms, and even the canteen. In 2012 newly appointed Principal, Kate Chapman, ran a series of focus groups for parents and carers to identify areas of improvement. From this the school ran a series of community workshops to develop a system map articulating the school's values, with 'community' identified as a core value and supportive structure underpinning the work of the school.
- ▶ **Bonython Primary School:** Bonython PS recognises that parents are a child's first teachers and they, in partnership with school, play a vital role in the ongoing development of their children as lifelong learners. One of the school's priorities is to enhance the agency of all key stakeholders and further develop the engagement of families.
- ▶ **Charles Weston Primary School:** Charles Weston School opened in February 2016 in the newly created Molonglo region of Canberra. Being the only public building in the area, the school has become a central meeting place for a diverse, evolving community. Parents have been engaged in the school's development from the very outset and are connected to the school and their children's learning through multiple, innovative ways.
- ▶ **Macquarie Primary School:** Parent engagement at Macquarie Primary School recognises the important roles that both parents and teachers play in children's learning, development, and wellbeing – and that children thrive when there are connections between the different spaces they learn in. A guiding principle of the school is that learning doesn't just happen between 9am and 3pm. Teachers and school leaders infuse this principle in the design and delivery of learning programs and community events. Particular emphasis is placed on teachers' communication with families, especially through the affordances of technologies such as *Google Communities*.
- ▶ **Alfred Deakin High School:** Previous school survey results at Alfred Deakin had shown that some of the parent community did not feel as involved in decision-making at the school and learning with their children as they wanted to. Since that point the school has worked tirelessly to build a culture of engagement, offering avenues for parents to be regularly informed about what is happening at school and

how they can engage in their child's learning. This has borne fruit as survey results track upwards and opportunities for engagement grow.

## References

ACT Directorate of Education (2015). *Progressing Parental Engagement School Fact Sheet: Building a strong culture of parent-school engagement*. Canberra.

Epstein, J. L. and Associates (2009). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Epstein, J. L. (1995, May). *School/family/community partnerships: caring for the children we share*. Phi Delta Kappan, 76, 701e712.

Fox, S. and Olsen, A (2014). Education Capital: Our Evidence Base. *Defining Parental Engagement*. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

## Case Study 1: Isabella Plains Early Childhood School



Isabella Plains is in its ninth year of operation. In partnership with Communities@Work, the school provides education and care services for children from birth to eight years of age. We also provide a range of family programs that aim to support the wellbeing of children and families. As an early childhood school, Isabella Plains focuses on three core outcomes: high quality learning, integrated service delivery, and family support and participation.

### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **When we enrol a child, we enrol their family.** Our teachers recognise that children's learning, health, and general wellbeing are interconnected and inseparable from those of their families. As such, we provide an array of universal and targeted programs that support children and build family and community capacity.
- ▶ **There are no wrong doors.** If a family – new or existing – needs support or information, they can come and speak to any member of staff, without making an appointment. The school environment reflects this philosophy: we have a family room with couches, books, games, and other facilities, which families can use whenever they like; we also have a room set aside specifically for breastfeeding, and are the only school in the ACT to be accredited as a Breast Feeding Friendly Workplace.
- ▶ **Our school culture is underpinned by the 'Windows and Mirrors' analogy.** We promote the importance of all community members not only having their own culture reflected back to them (i.e. The Mirror), but also being able to experience other people's cultures and ways of life (i.e. The Window). This lens is applied to our physical resources, the way we communicate, our displays, our gatherings/celebrations, and our outdoor learning environments.

*"We highly value children leading a balanced lifestyle where they have sufficient time and opportunity to participate in quality family time and enrichment activities that contribute to children's acquisition of a more diverse and varied skill set – such as external groups and clubs, music lessons, and sports."*

Kate Woods, Principal



## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement



### **Growing with Grands**

**Growing with Grands** is a community engagement initiative in which residents from the neighbouring retirement village come to the school to mentor students in gardening. Students take part in planting seeds, caring for the garden, and harvesting produce. The initiative is an opportunity for students to not just learn about gardening, but to also spend time with a positive role model. For some of our students, this program is one of the only chances they have to develop inter-generational connections.

- ▶ **Parenting Workshops** – we host parent workshops that cover topics such as reading with children, circles of security, and UrFAB (which focuses on understanding and responding to feelings and behaviours).
- ▶ **School and Social Gatherings** – our Class Connectors have organised numerous coffee mornings in the family room, coordinated outings to parks and child-friendly clubs, and facilitated a school trip to the snow.
- ▶ **Celebrations** – we host celebrations for families during Children's Week, Harmony Day, Book Week, and Literacy and Numeracy Week.
- ▶ **Seesaw** – we use the Seesaw app to document students' learning (both in pictures and text) and then send it to parents so that they can participate in their child's learning journey in real-time.
- ▶ **GEMS** – GEMS stands for Genuine Engagement Mutual Support and is a parents' association that assists with school events. GEMS is not just a fundraising body, but rather a group of parents who represent the entire school community.

### **Our partners in parent engagement**

- Communities@Work
- Australian Red Cross – Breakfast Program
- ACT Playgroup Association – Backyard Rangers
- KidsMatter
- ACT Fresh Tastes
- Ride and walk to school
- Child and Family Centre
- ACT Smart Schools



## Parent engagement in action: The Class Connect program

The Class Connect program aims to strengthen parent engagement, build positive relationships, and develop a sense of community for each class. The program involves a family member from each class acting as a liaison between families and classroom educators.

When the program was first piloted, the need for volunteers to help in the classrooms was identified, but as the program grew and families started to make more connections with each other, we found that parents wanted to belong to a more formal classroom network.



Class Connectors have been actively organising class resources, informal gatherings with other classroom families, volunteers for working bees, and lists detailing the interests and talents of parents in the school community. The Class Connectors are supported by two coordinators who facilitate training and ongoing catch-ups. They also assist with advertising classroom events and provide resources as needed.

As families have become better connected with the school, more opportunities have been created to assist in their child's classroom, and, in return, families have been able to become more familiar with their child's school routine and learning.

Some of the achievements of our Class Connectors include the introduction of a final year t-shirt, a school visit from a podiatrist, and a free workshop entitled *Making the Most of Parenting*.



Our Class Connectors have reported that families are enjoying the opportunities opened to them through the program and our educators have reported that they are now better assisted in the classroom. A major component of the program's success is the enthusiasm of the participants and their interest in building positive relationships amongst members of the school community.

***"We truly believe that if the family is involved and if they know more about what goes on in the school, then that will translate back to the child and support their learning."***

Louise McCormick, Community Coordinator

## What have we learned along the way?

**Critical factors** in building engagement with all parents have included:

- ▶ **Developing strategies, documentation, and a coordinated approach** to embed parental engagement as an essential schools community factor.
- ▶ **Developing purposeful and genuine relationships** with families to best support the child.
- ▶ **All families are treated with respect and dignity.**
- ▶ **Families receive support as needed** in response to our commitment to a 'no wrong doors' approach.
- ▶ **Families have a range of support services and programs** within the school.
- ▶ Parent engagement is an **explicit part of the school improvement agenda** each year.



## Taking parent engagement forward...

In terms of sustaining and improving parent engagement at our school we are taking forward a number of approaches, including:

- ▶ A designated parent engagement team working on strategies to enhance parent engagement.
- ▶ A digital communications app (*SeeSaw*), which offers a real time window into a child's learning. This form of communication has proved popular. Still in its infancy, we will continue to try and maximise usage by parents.
- ▶ Schoolstream has become the primary form of communication. We will continue to develop this platform and extend its usage.
- ▶ The community partnerships audit is being reviewed to fine tune services and programs offered to families.
- ▶ The newly elected GEMS parents' association will be supported by key staff members to ensure a smooth transition.
- ▶ The new chaplain has been inducted and is being supported to work and develop programs that support children and families within the school community.

Additionally, this term we have scheduled some focus groups to examine the issue of inclusion for **English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD)** families. We have asked for assistance from more confident EALD families to assist with translating documents, such as the canteen menu, and hope to build on that.

***"Well done to everyone who was there selling all the scrumptious food today. I love our community."***

Parent, 2 July 2016, IPECS Election Day Cake and BBQ Stall

## Case Study 2: Lyons Early Childhood School

Lyons Early Childhood School (LECS) aims to foster parent engagement that enhances learning for children in all areas of development. It does this by offering a nurturing environment in which every parent is valued, respected and encouraged to reach their full potential. The school promotes joined-up approaches to learning and development between home and school, working together with parents to build capable, competent young learners.



***“We support parent engagement in an environment of rich learning and development for children and families. Our school is a welcoming, positive, happy and inclusive community. We believe that everyone matters. This core belief underpins everything we do.”***

Mary Hutchinson, Principal

### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **We support both child and parent.** When we enrol a child at LECS, we embrace all family members. The strengths, priorities and needs of the child as well as the whole family are the basis for establishing any support process. Within this concept of the family, the wider social context in which the child lives is considered and support may be found in other settings such as playgroups and agencies offering additional services.
- ▶ **The strengths of child and parent are recognised.** Every parent has skills and abilities. We consider the strengths of parents as resources for driving learning and teaching. We offer support that enhances and promotes parent capabilities. Our practices and procedures are planned in response to child and parent needs, providing them with the knowledge and skills that allow them to mobilise their strengths and acquire the skills that they need.
- ▶ **We identify the concerns and priorities of the parent.** The decisions parents make about their children's lives reflect their priorities based on a diversity of beliefs, values, experience and circumstances. We believe it is critical to identify these priorities to ensure that services are designed to accomplish what is important for the parent. Our family-centred practices support the child and parent and are implemented in response to their priorities. Research shows that this gives parents a sense of control over their lives.
- ▶ **Parent's values and lifestyles are acknowledged.** We develop practices and programs to reflect the diversity of culture, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours of each child and family.

***“Part of the reason we've been established is to support children and families. And as much as possible whatever we do at school we try and relate it for families to what's happening at home.”***

Mary Hutchinson, Principal

- ▶ **Parents are supported in making informed decisions and choices.** Parents may often need to make complex decisions in regard to their children's education and require access to a range of information to support their decision-making. We believe it is important to provide comprehensive information in a sensitive way that helps parents to understand their children's needs, to be informed about services, and to be informed about resources in their community. Empowering parents to make decisions fosters their sense of control and provides a basis for partnership in the school-home relationship.
- ▶ **The individual needs of each parent and family are reflected in the service provided.** We develop practices and procedures to meet the individual needs of each parent and family.
- ▶ **Services are coordinated.** We focus on developing a well-coordinated system of accessible services both within our school and between our school and other agencies.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement



### *Collaborating with community*

### *Parenting*

### *Volunteering*

### *Communicating*

### *Learning at home*

**An integrated service across birth to eight** (education and child care and teaching) using a shared language across birth to eight services, a birth to eight P&C, joint admin staff, an integrated preschool program, jointly developed policies, practices and procedures.

**Showcasing learning to parents** – all early childhood professionals participate in joint professional learning, sharing this with parents and encouraging parent participation in that learning.

**Festivals of Learning** (where children showcase their learning) integrated into a whole school day and across a school week so that parents can attend and engage at a time that suits them.

**Active, planned collaboration between early childhood professionals and parents**, fostering seamless learning between school and home (e.g. community surveys, outdoor learning consultation).

**Programs for parents from diverse backgrounds**, such as a multilingual playgroup and interpreter services.

**An open, welcoming building** which includes a central atrium area for parents to gather, to observe their children in class discretely, to relax and feel comfortable as part of the school community.

## Parent engagement in action: Loose Parts Play

At Lyons Early Childhood School we set about completing a whole-of-school community designed and developed outdoor landscape plan. We introduced *Loose Parts Play*. Education about this was a key component and we set about engaging our parent community in understanding why and how changes were being made, and how they can translate this model of play-based learning into the home environment.



We placed an intentional focus on the **Theory of Loose Parts**. At LECS this has involved providing opportunities for children to engage with materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, taken apart and put together in endless ways, encouraging creative thinking, open-ended learning and personal and social growth. *Loose Parts Play*

allows children to develop their own ideas, solve problems and explore their world and how they relate to themselves and others. We wanted to enhance parent understanding about this important concept of the child as a competent, capable individual. It is a different approach to what many parents know from their own schooling or experience of school.

We set up a **Loose Parts Shed** using a retired shipping container, spruced up in collaboration with local visual artists. Parents see how, at school, *Loose Parts Play* can be set up and made available as part of the children's day, enhancing outcomes by providing a richer environment than just a landscape of fixed equipment and concrete.

We hosted **Loose Parts Play sessions for parents**, demonstrating how children are supported by explicit teaching of safety and risk, hazards,

benefits and precautions, and by teaching skills specific to materials available such as cubby making and handling of sticks. We showed how this type of play also creates opportunities for the development of Dispositions for Learning (a core concept of early childhood pedagogy in our school), including critical and creative thinking, and personal and social capabilities.

Regular newsletter articles as well as **workshops** offered after school hours were initiated to inspire parents to create opportunities for this form of play at home and to understand its implementation as part of curriculum delivery. Through *Loose Parts Play*, the concept of play-based learning is becoming well-articulated and better understood. Parents are shown how, at home, *Loose Parts Play* can be set up on a small or large scale.

**The introduction of this initiative has been successful because it** addressed specific enquiries from parents and was informed by their needs. It was a way to address a school priority that was relevant to community need. It is an initiative that fits well with our school philosophy, a practical manifestation of this which can be easily adopted in the home environment in addition to school.

Mary Hutchinson, Principal

***"Loose parts is the strongest indicator of confidence, creativity and craftsmanship. We are proud to hear stories where our daughter stretches these dispositions through her engagement in loose parts each week."***

Parent

## Parent engagement in action: Peace Table

At Lyons Early Childhood School we were keen to share and enhance understanding of our Restorative Practices model with parents. The concept of the *Peace Table* was introduced as we believed this could effectively translate from school to the home environment, ensuring the two are effectively aligned to support positive relationships.

Our school is all about relationships. As part of our approach, we empower children to have a voice in building relationships and repairing relationships when things go 'wrong'. Working alongside us to support their children at home, some parents were keen to understand the model of behaviour support that we implement. Others were unfamiliar with the approach and could not clearly understand the process, causing angst when they received information about incidents and our responses to them.



***"Peace table provides an opportunity for children to have a voice when issues arise. They are also useful when talking to my child about issues at school."***

Parent

We wanted to share our practice with the parent community as a means of showing what we have learnt about evidence-based best practice. We were keen to involve parents in understanding our Restorative Practices approach for supporting positive behaviour and building relationships. We knew that the concept of the *Peace Table* – an important component of our practice – could effectively translate to the home environment and help parents support children when things go 'wrong'.

Because we believe that no significant learning occurs without a

significant relationship, at our school you will see the concept of the *Peace Table* being demonstrated and explained to parents so that they can implement the practice at home. To support this, we have ensured that teachers understand and can clearly articulate the process. **Class blogs** were developed and used to share teacher learning. **Parents were encouraged to come in to the school**, ask questions, watch as children demonstrated the process, and hear how our research guides our practice. In an effort to catch all parents we have also sought to educate them about *Peace Tables* through other means, such as **information sessions and fact sheets**.

***"Parents have said to me their children have come home and used the language of the peace table, so they have then used that at home. That says to me that's a really integrated approach."***

Mary Hutchinson, Principal

The **positive home-school communication** through this initiative has had a beneficial outcome for parents. The manner in which we have been proactive in communicating and interacting with parents has affected the extent and quality of their involvement with their children's learning at home. Parents report they have become more confident about the value of being involved in their child's school.

**The success of parent engagement in this initiative has been achieved through the voice of the child.** Children have been explicitly taught the process and the language of relationships. They have built their capacity to articulate a practice that they had not before experienced, and empowered parents to adopt the approach at home.

## What have we learned along the way?

As an Early Childhood School with integrated education and care and teaching we have a deliberate and mandated focus on families in a more holistic sense to that of the traditional school model. While many of our families are drawn to us because of our approach, we continually need to work with them to ensure they can engage in their child's learning, particularly as many are time poor.



**Critical factors** in building engagement with all parents have included:

- ▶ **Committing to a shared vision** that has been jointly developed, is showcased by every early childhood professional and regularly reviewed through whole school community feedback.
- ▶ **Providing a cooperative, welcoming environment.** Our learning spaces honour the place of parents in the education of their children. Functionality of furniture and design layout supports parents being present to engage in children's learning. Shifts in budget allow for resources that support furniture, display spaces, and outdoor play space that target parents being welcomed on to the school premises.
- ▶ **Articulating and implementing a relationship practices framework** that is at the core of all we do.
- ▶ **Embracing a holistic approach to supporting parents in the education of their child.** We consider the context of the individual family, providing information on and linking parents to regional services and support. Information shared consistently includes parenting support, current early childhood research as well as details of our school's curriculum programs, practices and procedures.
- ▶ **Offering programs and resources that are inclusive of diverse backgrounds** (e.g. multicultural playgroup, interpreter support). We proactively share information through multimodal means.
- ▶ **Fostering collaboration and consultation in all aspects of our school community.** The voice of the parent and child is pivotal in our decision-making structures.



## Taking parent engagement forward...

We plan to sustain our parent engagement initiatives through **regular communication to parents** (including requesting feedback from them through a term survey), and **induction of new staff** in shared learning and development strategies, such as the *Peace Table*. We also plan to extend this strategy across the education and care component of our Early Childhood School. In this way we hope it will become an effective tool **embedded into family practice at home** for supporting conflict resolution in a manner which is aligned to school practice.

We are going to **prioritise enhanced parent engagement as a target in our school's next Strategic Plan**. This means reflecting on what we have done and continuing to evolve our approach based on our parent community's priorities, strengths, needs and desires, and aligning this to evidence-based best practice. Parents are at the heart of this journey as we look to enhance the collaborative approach between school and home in order to build capable and competent young people.

## Case Study 3: Narrabundah Early Childhood School

Narrabundah Early Childhood School (NECS) operates as an integrated service model which places the rights and needs of children and their families at the centre. Families have access to a comprehensive array of programs that support children's early learning thus building family and community capacity. Services from different government and community agencies (e.g. education, child care, health programs and family support) are linked so that each child and family has easy access to services and programs when required.



***"Here, when you enrol a child you enrol a family. Part of our brief is that parents need to be the best parents they can be. And we know that when we meet those basic needs we have the benefit of having settled children who can engage in their learning."***

Bernadette Hayes, Principal

### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **We place the rights and needs of children and their families at the centre.** We understand that in order to support children's learning we need to know them in the context of their family, culture and community. We acknowledge that families are central to children's development and where children are not thriving, outcomes are improved when the whole family is supported. There are many children at the school who have complex social, emotional and health needs that must be met before their learning can be effective. Helping children means helping families.
- ▶ **Parent engagement underpins everything we do.** It is embedded in our strategic plan, vision, mission, philosophy and practice. Central to this is the importance of creating a community of lifelong learners. We believe every person, at every stage of their life should have learning opportunities that enable them to reach their potential in all aspects of their life.
- ▶ **We work very hard to form genuine partnerships with parents and families.** Respectful relationships form the basis of all interactions at our school. We believe in forming genuine partnerships with families and across services in the learning, care and development of children. The school understands that families are their children's first and most influential educators, and that they can bring significant skills and experiences to our community.
- ▶ **Our school and our people open and accessible.** We operate an open door, no appointments policy for parents

***"At this school they come over the bridge to meet me and I don't have to cross the bridge and navigate my way to meet them. I don't have to pretend to be someone else."***

Parent

and families. This encourages open communication, feedback and provides the opportunity for parents to discuss any concerns they may have when they need it. The principal meets and greets families at the beginning and end of each day and teachers are available at the end of class to chat with families. Parents are welcomed through the many programs we offer and are provided opportunities in which they can contribute to the life of the school.

► **We have frameworks and structures to support and enhance our practice.** Part of our leadership team composition includes a Community Coordinator, a position which has been pivotal in providing the time to dedicate to parent engagement. We have formed partnerships with community providers to help support our families, framed by Memorandums of Understanding to set out our common vision, governance, communication, and roles and responsibilities. And we have used the *National School Improvement Tool* to support us in assessing and evaluating the partnerships we have created and how they support improved student outcomes.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement



**Partnerships with community service providers** to offer support to families and access to a range of services within the school. This includes a case manager from *Woden Community Service* providing a drop-in service at the school on a weekly basis, a partnership with *Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre*, and Maternal and Child Health Nurses and Midwifery on site.

**An array of programs are provided and run from the school** to engage parents and their children in building their skills, capacity and wellbeing. Examples include *Freshen It Up*, *Circle of Security*, *Move and Groove*, and *Triple P*.

**Training and workshops for families** offering support in parenting skills, communication, positive behaviours and engagement in their child's learning. This includes a partnership with *Real Schools* delivering resources, workshops, and observation to embed restorative practice into both school and home. The school also offers parent workshops in literacy, numeracy and inquiry based learning. Teachers deliver interactive workshops providing practical resources and ideas ready for inquiring parents to connect learning at school and at home.

### Collaborating with community

### Parenting

### Volunteering

### Communicating

### Learning at home

**Every morning we have a gathering for children and families**, in which we let families know what is happening that day, check in with children on how they are feeling and celebrate children who are demonstrating respect for self, others, and the environment. We also have a regular **community breakfast** and various **community events** throughout the year.

**A parent library** is on site to provide the community with information about a wide range of topics. Parents are welcome to borrow from any section of the school library for a two week period.

***"It's a wonderful program. We loved being involved. It was great for my kids to get to interact with others and for me to meet other parents in the local community."***

Parent

## Parent engagement in action: partnership with Woden Community Service

Narrabundah Early Childhood School established a partnership with Woden Community Service to address a gap in service provision in the inner south of Canberra. This coming together has engendered shared expertise and resources to make a real difference in the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged families in the community.

Since the opening of NECS in 2009 there has been a **high need for family support and linkage to relevant programs and services**. In response to this need, the school actively built a partnership with Woden Community Service Inc. The aim of the school-community partnership is to collaboratively provide vulnerable and disadvantaged families seamless access to a comprehensive array of quality services and programs to enhance children's outcomes. This

supports the integrated service delivery model the school is based on, offering a one-stop-shop for the community.

***“Great support, you guys have helped me with getting my child into childcare, Move and Groove and Circle of Security. You’ve made my life easier by helping me with Centrelink, Special Childcare Benefit and my mental health. My situation has improved 100%. I wouldn’t be where I am without the support.”***

Parent

Our **shared vision** is a vibrant and connected community, working together, empowering all members to achieve their potential. Mechanisms have been set-up to ensure the partnership is integrated into the culture and planning of each organisation.

A **Case Manager from Woden Community Service is located at the school every Tuesday** for drop-in or appointments for school families. This service is available to school families and the wider

community. Having a Case Manager at the school has proven to have many advantages, most notably the convenience for families, staff and the community. In the past, for many families, transport has been a barrier to accessing services and programs. The Case Manager and school also work collaboratively to improve attendance.

In addition to Case Management, the school-community partnership has provided school families and the wider community **access to parenting programs at the school**. Feedback from participants of these programs has been positive, with participants taking away new parenting ideas, strategies and the importance of being a reflective parent. The partners are planning to offer families the *Circle of Security* parent program this year.

**This school-community partnership is successfully addressing a range of complex factors** that influence young people's educational outcomes including: personal, family, institutional, community and societal factors. Benefits of the partnership are evident with **20% of school families being supported** with issues including emergency food relief, housing, health and mental health, domestic violence, social isolation, relationships, legal matters, return to work and study, and access to support services such as NDIS.

**Key to success** is the commitment to a shared partnership, guided by a Memorandum of Understanding and regular reviews involving the leadership of both organisations. The case managers that have come into the school have been a really good fit with our community and we have been active in introducing our families to these people so that they can build crucial rapport and trust.

**Our partnership received a highly commended in the RSM Partnership Award for producing important outcomes for Canberrans experiencing disadvantage.**

## What have we learned along the way?

Building engagement with our families has taken time and commitment, particularly in light of the vulnerability and disadvantage some in our community face, as well as previous negative perceptions and experience of school.

**Critical factors** in building engagement with all parents have included:

- ▶ **A school which explicitly focuses on the role and value of parents** and supporting them to support their children through an integrated service model. This has allowed us the creative licence to address parent engagement in an authentic way.
- ▶ **A school culture** that promotes learning for life, strong social and emotional learning (SEL), respectful relationships and celebrates diversity.
- ▶ **A strong school improvement agenda**, guided by reflection on what we do and where we can improve drawing on the National School Improvement Tool.
- ▶ **The school's Community Coordinator role** which has allowed for dedicated time and community sector expertise to work on our relationships with families and partnerships with community providers and programs.
- ▶ **Providing opportunities in partnership with other organisations** for parental self-growth, adult learning and enhancement of existing skills to support children's learning at home.
- ▶ **Ensuring senior leadership in partner organisations are involved** and have a high level of commitment to sustain and grow the partnership, guided by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and regular leadership meetings.

*“Having a community coordinator role is a pivotal part of enabling us to move forward on the community partnerships and parental engagement that we have.”*

Bernadette Hayes, Principal

## Taking parent engagement forward...

We are on a journey of continual improvement and are cognisant that we need to **regularly take stock of what we do** and **look for ways to best meet our community's need as it evolves**. Using the National School Improvement Tool framework as a guide to strengthen the school-community partnership evaluation process is one way we intend to do this.

We want to continue to improve communication between school and home and access ways and means to **support families to engage in teaching and learning programs** with their children, with a focus on improved learning outcomes. Building this connection and continuity between learning at school and at home is essential.



And we want to **build more and stronger partnerships with community organisations**. This means engaging senior leadership and ensuring they play an integral role. Having structures in place – like MOUs – to support partnerships and provide clear roles and responsibilities are key. By developing these partnerships further we can strengthen our school as a place of empowerment in all facets of life, enhancing the opportunities for children and families alike.

## Case Study 4: Southern Cross Early Childhood School

As an early childhood school (birth to eight years) we work together with our community to develop every child to become a successful lifelong learner. Our focus at the school is to develop a thriving school community where staff and families openly work as willing partners; and a safe, inclusive setting where the strengths and needs of all members of our school community are recognised, respected and valued.

From the first interaction with our school, relationships are our first priority. As Dr Jeremy Corner wrote, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." We recognise that our families come from differing places and that no one size will fit all. We know that sometimes our schools can be overwhelming and we reach out to families to make them feel welcome and informed about the schools and the ways we can communicate.



*"When I am working with my team we often talk about the importance of the three "R's". For us at Southern Cross the three "r's" are relationships, relationships, relationships. We know that relationships are central to our practice."*

Lyndall Read, Principal

### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **Education is not something that should happen to children.** Instead we believe children should be active participants in and advocates for their own learning. For children to truly be empowered in this way we need parents to help us learn about their child and how we can best support them. It's about helping us to help the children to see the value of learning, and we can do that better if we have the parent knowledge of the child.
- ▶ **The experiences our parents have had of their own schooling are wildly different.** At our school we need to give them every opportunity to have positive experiences, to know that we are a safe place and to understand that we value and appreciate everything they have to offer.
- ▶ **Parents are the experts in their child.** We have an obligation to listen and learn from our families. When parents have input into the school we are richer for the amazing range of interests and passions they bring. The diversity and discussions we have to foster it are critical to having a well-functioning community that embraces all parents and children.
- ▶ **We want our families to want to be here.** We don't always get it right, it's something that keeps us on our toes all the time, but that's the good part about it. It's about us being learners as well – one approach might not work

*"When families are really connected with the school, when they have that feeling as well – that they love and trust the school – then kids are more likely to have that too."*

Lyndall Read, Principal

for a certain family but we'll try something else. If we make a mistake we ask ourselves what the way forward is. How can we change things, improve things? How can we make this work for this family? That's something we are often thinking about.

- **We strive to build connection with different families in different ways.** Our reason for having lots of ways 'in' for families is that no one way will work for all families so we need to have lots of different things. Every child has a right for the school to be connected to their family. That's a right of every child. We do well in this area but we need to keep evolving and thinking about more ways to do this. There's always more we can learn in this area.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent

**Communication is the key to fostering positive partnerships** with families. We do this through a variety of ways, and one such was is through holiday postcards. Just before school starts for the year we send a postcard to every child enrolled at the school, from their teacher. This ensures that children have a reminder about school starting, and so they know their teacher is thinking of them. Feedback suggests these are warmly received by all!

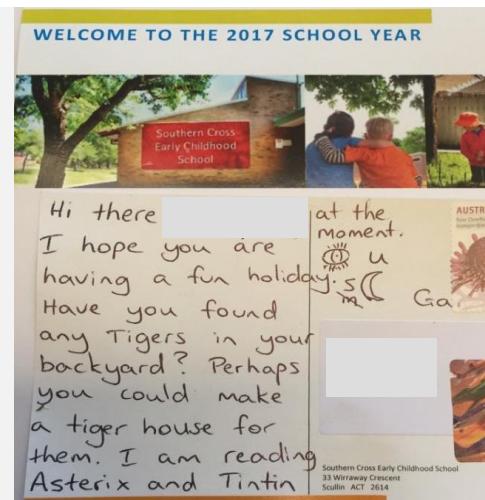
**We support parenting** through information shared in newsletters and on noticeboards, and by offering courses in collaboration with community organisations. These are aimed at developing better understanding about child development, learning, mental health and wellbeing. Courses include *Parents as Teachers*; *Circle of Security Parenting*; *Tuning into Kids*, and *Cool Little Kids*.

**We invite members of the school and local community to share** their skills and knowledge with children at the school, such as through lunchtime learning clubs which run for a term, e.g. Bollywood classes and gardening; 'have a go' sessions where volunteers share their skills, e.g. Indian cooking, ukulele playing; class social coordinators who welcome and support families in their class or year level and provide opportunities for families to connect through planned social activities outside school hours; and through classroom learning support, and extra curricula events, like sports days.

**Collaborating with the community** is a key part of the school's ethos, and this is done in a variety of ways to enrich learning in the school and promote the school as a positive, inclusive and safe learning environment. Some of the initiatives offered include *Stay and Play*, a free weekly playgroup; *Move and Groove*, a music workshop for children under 5 and their carers; and access to the school's designated bike track, which is available for other schools and community groups to use.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** Families at our school and within our community are invited into the school to share their knowledge with children and families at the school. ATSI families at the school acknowledge their country and culture in a group tapestry.

Parents and carers are encouraged to take an active role in **decision making** and **shaping programs** across the school. Key opportunities to do this include through the School Board, the P&C, the KidsMatter Action Team to support SEL, the Sustainability Program, and by sharing thoughts on the Curriculum at various forums.



**"My year one boy says he hopes you are looking forward to teaching him and he loved getting a card from school."**

**"My kindy kid was so excited to get a postcard from her new teacher; I think you won a heart with that one."**

**"The postcards were a big hit at our place. We have two very excited Kindergarteners ready to go, and one nostalgic Year 3er who wishes he wasn't too big for SCECS!"**

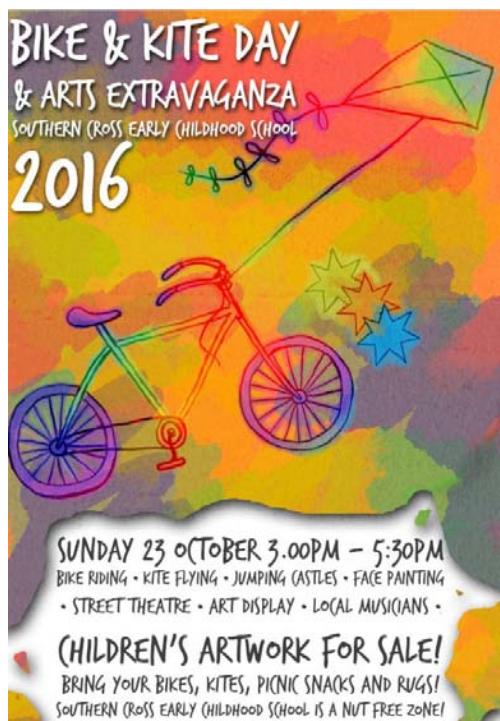
Parent comments, Facebook page

## Parent engagement in action: Benefits of a Community Coordinator

To strengthen the link between school and family, we established the position of Community Coordinator in 2015. Over the course of 2014 it was identified that the school had a need for increased support both in supporting families and engaging with the school community and broader community over the fence.

The role of the Community Coordinator is to:

- ▶ Organise community events for children and families
- ▶ Be available to discuss school concerns, family matters and parenting issues
- ▶ Connect families with specialist support services
- ▶ Provide opportunities for families to meet and develop friendships
- ▶ Schedule parent information sessions on subjects such as parenting, attachment, and anxiety
- ▶ Listen and provide general support.



By having a designated Community Coordinator position it ensures that parent engagement is highly valued at the school.

Some of the initiatives and programs implemented by the Community Coordinator include:

- ▶ *Read with Me café* – parents and children attend the school library every Friday morning to share a book and enjoy pikelets in the school library. By sharing a story with their child, parents and carers model literacy skills while developing strong parent-child relationships.
- ▶ *Community Breakfasts* – Each term, families are invited to share breakfast together.
- ▶ *Bike and Kite Day* – one of our major events for families from our school, child care and other family programs at school.
- ▶ *Intensive Family Support* – a major part of the Community Coordinator role is to provide intensive support to families who are experiencing ongoing difficulties. Referrals, advocacy and joint planning are all part of this service for families.

Southern Cross ECS has created a hub where the community gathers to foster their children's learning and experiences. An environment has been established to provide and integrate services that support the child and the family. By building community partnerships through a range of educational opportunities and community activities, improved outcomes for children and families has been achieved.

*"The Community Coordinator role is a critical success factor for us; if I had to move from here I would never work in a school without somebody doing that kind of work. Ever. It's not that other staff can't do it, but the busyness of school sweeps you away and along, so [name] is like the Jiminy Cricket of parent engagement; in terms of that connection, and making sure we don't lose sight of that."*

Lyndall Read, Principal

## What have we learned along the way?

We understand that as a school we need to **build trust** with our families and develop a connected community.

We do this by **accepting and valuing the culture** that families bring to the school.

With new families starting each year, it is important to **connect and work together** to develop a supportive learning environment. We strive to improve this practice each year. The **Community Coordinator role** is integral to this.

Findings ways for our families to connect is paramount. No one thing will work for all families. **Every child has a right for the school to be connected to their family.** We do well in this area but we need to keep evolving and thinking about more ways to do this. There's always more we can learn.



## Taking Parent Engagement forward...

**Talking about their day is harder with younger children.** They're tired, they've had such a busy day, they don't want to talk about it. But we hope to work with children so they can share their learning with their families and be advocates and agents for their own learning. Children are another mechanism for us to be able to connect families with their learning.

**We are working towards capturing our approach to parent engagement.** We are continually trying new things, having a go to see what works in this area. We put a lot of effort into this; and sometimes we forget how hard we work in this area. We want to capture this for the community, the story of our school. Over the course of the year we want to document and be explicit about what we do here and why we value parent engagement so highly.

**We also want to continue to look for opportunities** to learn from other schools both nationally and internationally for opportunities to evolve and improve our parent engagement efforts.

***"Our teachers and staff here are in tune and know when something's not right, and can bounce that off me or the principal, or the exec team. Teachers' lives are very busy and I can only imagine it would be very easy just to let that go... But I don't think we're doing that. I think we can always improve in that area, but I think we respond to our families quite well."***

Jason Thornton, Community Coordinator

## Case Study 5: Ainslie School



Ainslie School is one of Canberra's oldest public schools with a connected and diverse parent community. A quarter of our children speak English as an Alternative Language or Dialect and we draw on that as a strength in our classrooms, and in particular in our canteen volunteer program. In 2012 our newly appointed Principal, Kate Chapman, ran a series of focus groups for parents and carers to identify areas of improvement. Out of this Ainslie School ran a series of community workshops to develop a system map articulating the school's values, with 'community' identified as a core value and supportive structure underpinning the work of the school.

***"Parents say to me that this school is like a family, that they love it and that their children love it."***

Kate Chapman, Principal

### Building a parent engagement culture

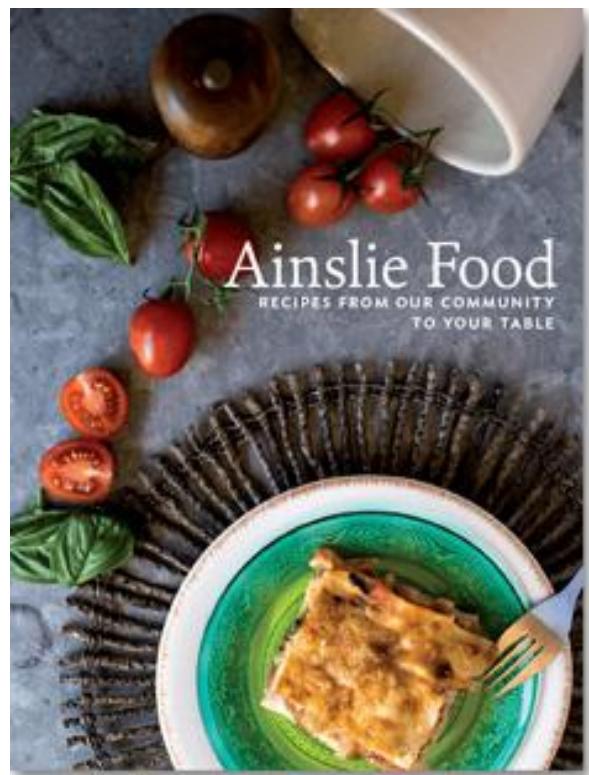
- ▶ **Parents are vital partners.** Our staff value the strong community support they receive and prioritise productive relationships and keeping parents *informed* in the quest to educate our students.
- ▶ **We focus on deliberative strategies to create an inclusive and successful learning community.** Many families at this school are comfortably off and vitally interested in the education of their children, but are time poor. This means we have to find creative ways to facilitate *their* engagement with what their children are doing at school. Social media, combining P&C meetings with family film nights, and providing opportunities for students to perform, keep parents informed and bring them into the school.
- ▶ **The importance of parent engagement is a message relayed to the school community often.** This message is shared at assemblies, at information evenings and through the newsletter. The same message is conveyed to staff so their awareness of this priority is strong and their assistance with it becomes part of what they do.
- ▶ **Three-way conferences enable parents to be more involved.** As part of the reporting schedule, we have introduced three-way conferences to enable parents to be more involved with their child's goal-setting and achievements. Parents are still able to have a conversation with the teacher about their child without the child being present, but parents are coming to understand that the conferences help their child to accept responsibility for their learning and most actively engage with them.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement

- ▶ **Online communication** – Our teachers in preschool use the *Storypark* app to share a student's day with their parents. *Google Classroom* is used increasingly in other parts of the school, and our Facebook and Instagram accounts are also used to regularly communicate with parents.
- ▶ **Classroom Carers** – Parent volunteers act as an additional communication tool between the school and the parent community, by relaying messages and coordinating resource acquisition.
- ▶ **Parent information evenings** – Evenings in reading and mathematics, for example, are conducted to help provide parents the confidence to assist their children at home.
- ▶ **Ainslie Food** – in 2015 a group of Ainslie parents worked to put together a cookbook of their recipes. This is sold to raise funds for the school's outdoor grounds.

### Canteen Volunteers

A previous manager, who is still involved at the school, draws volunteers in to help at the canteen. This has been very popular with our EALD parents, as it provides them with a structured, fun, and inclusive way to practice their English and build connections in the school while they help. These parents often cook food from their countries of origin, and use the time as an opportunity to increase their knowledge about their child's school.



*"My deputy and I are very visible members of the community and parents appear to be comfortable approaching us to talk. We go out of our way to connect with them and welcome them into the school. We attend meetings and functions and contribute our ANZAC biscuits and Rocky Road to fund-raising efforts. These are small things but we believe they make a difference in the quest to promote parental engagement."*

Kate Chapman, Principal

## Parent engagement in action: Building relationships from the very beginning

- ▶ **The Back to School Bash** is a strategy to engage parents in the school from the very first day of the school year. During the event, teachers gleefully sacrifice some of their dignity on the altar of student entertainment in an assembly that makes everyone feel welcome. It is followed by a ‘tea and tissues’ morning tea for parents, some of whom are leaving their children in our care for the first time.



- ▶ **Personal contact with each parent** is also a key component of our parent engagement strategy. During the first two weeks of the school year, each classroom teacher phones or personally speaks to the parent of every child in their class to invite them to the information evening. The excellent attendance at this event helps get everyone on the same page of the learning and begins the parent/teacher relationship. At the same time, Classroom Carers are appointed. These parents are a conduit for information from the teacher to the families. The program is a P&C initiative. This group of community members understands the importance of connecting parents and is complicit in our efforts to do so. They relay messages between teachers and parents and organise resources for classes.
- ▶ **The family picnic.** Held in Term 1, brings people from across the school community together to talk and play games. We also host information evenings for parents on topics like “helping your child with reading”. These events attract parents and build their skills as our partners.

*“John and I wanted to touch base and say how welcoming we’ve found you all and the Ainslie school community.”*

Parent, writing after the family picnic held in Term 1



## What have we learned along the way?

Through our previous consultations with the school community, we know that parents and carers want to help with school decision making, they are keen to be involved in the education of their children, and they want to support their children to learn. They are happy, and expect, to work collaboratively with teachers to do it.

**Critical factors** in building engagement with our parents have included:

- ▶ A focus on building quality relationships
- ▶ A determined approach to establishing and maintaining effective communication strategies
- ▶ A commitment to inclusion
- ▶ A shared approach to decision-making
- ▶ Providing parents with attractive options for spending time in the school.

## Taking parent engagement forward...

This term, we have scheduled some focus groups to examine the issue of **better including our EALD families**, some of whom are eager to help us with this priority. We have asked for assistance from more confident EALD families to assist with translating documents, such as the canteen menu, and hope to build on that. We are also planning to incorporate **further information evenings** on 'how to help your child...' topics into the school calendar.



## Case Study 6: Bonython Primary

At Bonython Primary School we recognise that parents are their children's first teachers and they, in partnership with school, play a vital role in the ongoing development of their children as lifelong learners. One of our school's priorities is to enhance the agency of all key stakeholders and further develop the engagement of its families.

In his book, *Educating Ruby*, Guy Claxton states that 'all we can do is prepare our child for an unknown world'. There is a notion that success is measured on how academic you are, but we strive for all our children here to achieve their personal best, and this will look different for each individual. We encourage our kids to do the best that they can, and have high standards about that, but we also look at what next steps in learning are for that individual child. That's the most important thing for us at Bonython.



### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **What does 'success' look like?** We have initiated working parties of teachers, students and families to look at the correlations of all three groups around 'success' skills. On social media we've asked our families to think of a person in their lives who is successful, and what that success looks like, and what attributes they have. No-one has talked about literacy and numeracy, or being an 'expert' – those things are by-products of learning assets and dispositions. Instead our families are talking about being passionate about what they're learning about, perseverance, integrity, rigour, grit, and resilience – the key attributes to being literate and numerate.
- ▶ **Finding a way to connect in a busy world.** Over the last few years we have found more and more parents have been required to return to the workforce leaving less face to face volunteer time to support student learning within school hours. Due to the complexities of life we need to be innovative in how we connect school and home. Through the digital platform *Google Communities* we have found a way to allow parents to access their child's classroom in real time or a time that suits family commitments.

*"School is not just a place you go to between 9 and 3; we want to knock down the walls of the school and start thinking about education, thinking about us as the hub of the community, and what's out there that we can hook into. We want to look at our role in that bigger picture and engage with local business to prepare our children for the future."*

Greg Terrell, Principal

*"I have enjoyed the unique insight Google Communities has allowed us have into [name]'s learning. It offers us the opportunity to have targeted discussions about the learning and the fun [name] is experiencing at school."*

Parent feedback on the Google Community initiative

► **How do we communicate at Bonython?** From a communication perspective we believe we are connecting with our families better than ever before. Since our principal commenced in late 2015, we have looked at reducing our ‘administrivia’, the layers and layers of communication we had with parents around the same things. We have reinforced our lines of communication through notices that remind our families of all the ways in which they can connect with us (*‘Communicating with Families at BPS’*).

► **Giving a voice to all in the school community.** We have established a family working group, comprised of a good cross-section of families, and a steering committee for students, in addition to our leadership team. Through these forums we are engaging every member of the school community, and importantly increasing student voice in whole-school decision making.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement...

**Getting to Know You Interviews** are scheduled in Term 1. These focus on the whole child and establishing partnership in learning with the family

**The Power of the Positive phone call.** In building trusting relationships, we emphasise the importance of filling the ‘emotional bank accounts’ of parents. Teachers are encouraged to make regular contact with their parents, particularly those that don’t see at the school very often.

Posting communication and school events on **Facebook**. This has been instrumental in the uptake of Google Communities

**Bonython Briefing:** Monday morning whole school gathering to discuss the events of the week

**Local partnerships** with Neighbourhood Watch and Kindy Patch Early Childhood Centre

**Committee groups** to increase parental voice e.g. values committee

**For mothers**, Mums and Bubs Bootcamp and Yoga Mums operating out of our preschool

**Ongoing feedback opportunities** to improve current school actions and practices via digital surveys.



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### Communication with Families at BPS

#### Photos and Videos of Student Learning, Reminders, Learning Resources

Each learning unit has their own Google+ Community. This will be the primary source of communication between teachers and parents. Teachers will use this forum-style, invitation-only platform for posting photos and videos of student learning during the week, uploading resources for you to use at home and posting reminders about upcoming events.

Google+ can be accessed on any device connected to the internet and the App is free to download. Only photos of students with parental permission will be posted on our Community page. Please note, student Google Apps for Education (GAFE) accounts cannot access Google+.

You will need your own Google+ Community account to access your child’s Community. Please visit <https://plus.google.com> to sign up. If you already have a gmail account, it is very simple to set up. If you don’t have a gmail account, it is still relatively easy, just requiring a few extra steps. Once you have set up a Google+ account, search for the name of your child’s unit in the Communities section, i.e. Tidbinbilla, and click the button to request an invite. Alternatively, you can access the unit at <http://bit.ly/2p0gDinbilla>. Elsie Cummins, the Yerrabi unit teacher, is happy to help parents set up Google+ accounts. You can email her at [elsie.cummins@act.edu.au](mailto:elsie.cummins@act.edu.au) to make an appointment.

#### Notes Sent Home

Copies of all notes sent home can be found on the school website, <http://www.bonythons.act.edu.au/>

#### Teacher Email

Your child’s teacher will contact you via email in regards to your child specifically. Please ensure the Front Office has your current email address. You can contact the Tidbinbilla team at:



#### Newsletter

The Bonython Bulletin is emailed to families on Wednesdays of even weeks in the term. The newsletter is also available in hard copy at the front Office. The Bulletin contains important dates and information and forms part of our communication with families. Please ensure the Front Office has your current email address.

#### Facebook

Follow the school’s Facebook profile to see celebrations of learning across the school and for updates and reminders about upcoming events. Search for ‘Bonython Primary School’ and look for the school’s logo.

**“Part of the executive team’s responsibility is to encourage our teaching staff to make regular contact with their families. It is important to celebrate the things that are going well, as well as connect with families – just check in.”**

Greg Terrell, Principal

## Parent engagement in action: digitally connecting through Google Communities

In 2016 newly appointed principal Greg Terrell worked to enhance the connection between school and home through a digital platform. The purpose was to provide families with 'real time' access to classrooms and provide scaffolds to elicit conversations with their child about their school day. This has also empowered families to further support their child's learning in context with what is happening each day.

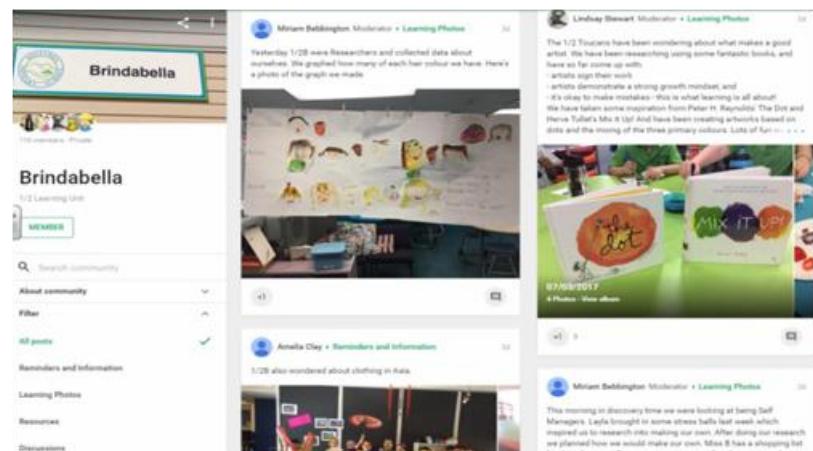
- ▶ **Being innovative.** Due to the complexities of life we needed to be innovative in how we connect school and home. We found that families were able to spend less time physically on the school site supporting their child's learning. With the introduction of Google Apps for Education to the ACT Education Directorate in 2016 it was discussed amongst staff on how this could be used as our main communication / education platform.
- ▶ **Developing teacher capacity.** Prior to this decision we had several teachers, led by our IT Coordinator attend and experiment with the functionality of Google Communities within their classroom. Once teacher capacity was developed it was taken to a parent forum to show families how we planned to use it as a medium of communication and sharing of learning experiences.
- ▶ **Consulting with families.** To support this we surveyed families to ascertain the most effective form of communication to share school life. The results indicated that along with Facebook, families were highly engaged and active in the use of Google Communities. The ICT Committee supported each learning unit in developing a profile for their Google community and worked with families on what types of things they wanted to see online.
- ▶ **Evaluating.** After a term, **feedback was requested from families.** A common thread was that parents found it highly engaging because they were able to get insight into their child's classroom and it provided them with a framework to have a conversation about the school day. Parents said 'no longer can my child respond with nothing, when asked, 'what did you do at school today?'.
- ▶ **Improved connections and less 'administrivia'.** From a teachers perspective they were able to focus more on teaching and learning as this platform took away a number of administration layers that occurred previously with communicating learning to the home.

Are you a member of the Murrumbidgee Google+ Community?



See photos of learning from the week, keep up to date with reminders and access resources to support your child's learning at home  
- all from your computer, tablet or smart phone!

Visit <http://bit.ly/bpsmurrumbidgee> to request an invite.



## What have we learned along the

## way?

- ▶ Our parent community are regular users of digital communication and have expressed positive feedback about our use of Facebook to communicate learning and school events.
- ▶ In order to sign up and engage as many parents as we can to Google Communities we have offered ongoing support of the platform to parents in the form of side by side tutorials with the ICT Coordinator. At the end of last year **95% of our families were members of one or more Bonython Primary Google Communities.**
- ▶ It has been worthwhile investing in the capability and capacity of our teaching staff in the functionality of Google Communities. The payoff for our school has been that teachers' posts which are focused on learning that happening on a daily basis in each classroom has resulted in **families having a more thorough understanding** of the whole school approach to learning and teaching at Bonython Primary School.
- ▶ **Tailoring each Google Community** to the unit allows for more targeted communication to occur. Parents are becoming confident to post and ask questions within this smaller community space.

## Taking parent engagement forward...

- ▶ Our next step with Google Communities is to include more **video resources for parents**. These will demonstrate learning strategies, such as maths strategies, spelling patterns and how to engage your child in reading. Other examples will include resources to support the teaching of social emotional skills.
- ▶ Another area Bonython Primary School would like to explore is the introduction of **student curated digital portfolios** to showcase learning and to provide a platform for self, peer, parent and teacher feedback to move learning forward.



A screenshot of a Facebook post from 'Bonython Primary School - A Canberra Public School'. The post features a grid of colorful, decorated question marks. The caption reads: 'How to Bring 'More Beautiful' Questions Back to School' and 'Young children ask lots of questions, but around the time they enter school, those... ww2.kqed.org'. The post has 4 likes. Below the post, there is another smaller image of a Facebook post with the same title and link, and the caption 'WHAT IS INQUIRY LEARNING?'.

## Case Study 7: Charles Weston School

Charles Weston School opened in February 2016 in the newly created Molonglo region of Canberra. Being the only public building in the area, the school has become a central meeting place for a diverse, evolving community. Parents have been engaged in the school's development from the very outset and are connected to the school and their children's learning through multiple ways...



***“Parental engagement is a key focus to developing our new school community. We would not have been able to successfully build a positive school community without our parents being engaged with our school and their child’s learning.”***

Kate McMahon, Principal

### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **Parent engagement has been a key building block in the development of the school.** The moment we commenced our planning we sought the views and opinions of families to shape our strategic direction and the development of our systems and practices. We continue to regularly ask parents what they want from our school, conducting surveys to establish a graduate profile for our school, finding out the values and expected behaviours parents wish to see, and identifying the communication strategies between home and school that best work.
- ▶ **We have an open-door policy to parents.** We strive to ensure school staff are visible and easily accessible. Our leadership team are on the playground each morning to greet parents. Our library is open every morning and parents are welcome to come in with their children. Parents are invited into the classroom on regular occasions, such as through shared learning journeys. We welcome and value the community into the school, providing a modern, well-equipped venue for local community groups and activities.
- ▶ **We are transparent in what we do and share what is going on.** We have made our practices explicit to parents and published documents including communication protocols, handbooks, safe and supportive schools procedures and our Positive Behaviours for Learning framework. We report against our school improvement plan each fortnight in the newsletter to allow our community to keep up to date with our progress and know that we are working towards goals...and that we value them knowing our progress.
- ▶ **Parent engagement is a deliberate focus of what we do.** Like our parents, all of our staff are new to the area and have participated in community events (even before the school opened) in order to get to know families. In our

***“Being upfront with parents with what we are doing has been really positive, trying to ensure that everyone knows what we are doing, being very open with our parents and families.”***

Kate McMahon, Principal

second year of operation we appointed one of our teachers to hold the role of community engagement officer. By creating this role, we place a deliberate emphasis on engaging parents, strengthening and formalising partnerships and building opportunities for parents, teachers and the community to gather together.

► **We are on a journey of innovation and improvement.** In consultation with parents we have embraced technology to enhance the connections between home and school, enabling busy parents to be engaged with what their children are learning remotely and in real time. Along with other feedback, we use this technology to gather data on parent engagement, allowing us to assess what is working and where we can improve.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement



**Interactive online platforms** that allow parents, grandparents and other family members to see – in real-time – what their children are doing at school and to be involved in two-way communication with both their child's teacher and their child.

**Access to school record-keeping and reward system** so that parents can view their child's profile and know when and for what their child is being rewarded. Parents are also informed when their child is receiving a certificate and is invited to an assembly.

**Inviting parents into school for reporting processes**, three-way goal setting meetings, learning journeys and fortnightly assemblies.

**Making teaching tools available** to parents on website so that they can understand what we are doing with students and how they can support this at home.

**Inviting parents into the school through a range of volunteering activities** – reading, music, passions and pursuits afternoons, guest speakers, and sporting activities.

**Providing social, sporting, educational and reporting sessions** both during school hours and in the evenings.

**Partnering with the Land Development Agency** for the region to hold community events, school initiatives and outreach activities.

**Establishing a playgroup** in partnership with interested parents, the school and a local community organisation. The playgroup not only attracts our current parents but prospective parents to our school community.

**Around 95% of parents reported being invited into school to participate in the learning activities of their children and felt supported and welcomed by staff.**

School survey data, 2016

## Parent engagement in action: digitally connecting students, teachers and families

At Charles Weston School we purchased a number of digital communication tools for use by teachers and students. These tools provide a platform for authentic reporting, enabling parents to remotely 'see' what is happening at school for their children in real time.

One tool is a digital portfolio tool (*SeeSaw*) which includes photos, videos, files and text being uploaded to a student portfolio. Parents are notified when there are new items for their child and are able to 'like' or make comments on these, which can then be fed back to the teacher and child.



***"SeeSaw is a great way for parents to feel included in their children's learning. When my children get home from school, we look at Seesaw together and have a conversation about their day – a huge improvement on the grunted 'I don't know' answer I used to get to my 'what did you do at school today?' question!"***

Parent, Bonython Primary

The leadership team introduced this to the teachers, who became very active in posting items to the portfolios. Over a three term period each child had on average 120 posts to their individual portfolios. By the end of the first year of using *SeeSaw* we had 77% of all students with parents connected to the tool.

**Parents have overwhelmingly been positive** about the use of the tool, and their ability to see what is happening at school from work or home is building stronger connections with school. It is also facilitating conversations about learning at home, providing parents with cues to share learning experiences and activities.

**This implementation of *SeeSaw* in the school was successful because** our teachers were digitally adept at using the technology, and we provided the hardware, software and support to make sure that teachers had the capacity to use it. We upgraded the tool to a paid version to allow for greater access to the features available. We encouraged, supported and cajoled our parents into downloading and using the tool.

**To improve this strategy** we have given a teacher time

each week to work on advertising and support strategies to ensure that all parents have access and are using *SeeSaw*. She is developing resources so that families who do not speak English are aware that the tool has a translation feature and is creating QR codes for easy upload of the app. Both our community engagement teacher and our ICT teacher are working together to support any parent or teacher who requires assistance. As our staff numbers increase we are developing a range of professional learning opportunities for teachers to ensure that we are all using the tool effectively to show learning and engage parents in their child's education.

**In one month alone, over 6,500 items were added to *SeeSaw* resulting in more than 12,000 parent visits, leaving more than 11,000 likes and 2,000 comments.**

## What have we learned along the way?

As a new school in an emerging community we had to work from the outset to establish our presence and build genuine, trusting relationships with families. Every little thing we do with parents contributes to us ‘building up a **bank of trust**’ with them and garners their confidence in what we are doing.

**Critical factors** in building trust and engagement with parents have included:

- ▶ **Being open to and requesting input from parents** into school practices and policies – it is not the principal’s school but the community’s school.
- ▶ **Being consistent and staying on message** in working towards community engagement goals for the school.
- ▶ **Educating and empowering parents** in terms of what we are doing and how they can contribute.
- ▶ **Providing opportunities for parents to be present** and contribute to their child’s learning, in different ways.
- ▶ **Being patient and prioritising** – it takes time to build a community, to build trust and genuine partnerships with parents. There can be a tendency to want to do too much too soon; realistic expectations of what can be done and prioritising and planning these is crucial.

*“Just being visible, being available to talk is the biggest thing. Once you’ve got that you can implement other things.”*

Tessa Dorman, Community Engagement Officer



## Taking parent engagement forward...

As the area grows and new families move in it is essential that we continue to focus on the school as a community asset. We are deliberately **placing the community at the heart of our school improvement strategy**, with the allocation of time for a teacher to take on a community engagement officer role. As part of the role, this person will help to coach and mentor our teachers in relation to parent engagement, so that it is more sustainable and embedded into whole-of-school practices and approaches.

We are not resting on our laurels and intend to **strengthen the use of digital communication tools**: making sure the last few parents are connected with SeeSaw, and building the interactivity of parents on this platform by encouraging and sharing comments. Our goal is to increase the number of comments parents provide on the tool, which can instantaneously be passed on to their children in the classroom.

Beyond that, we want to **further empower parents in the school and their child’s learning** by expanding the use of videos to show what and why we have particular practices in place (e.g. Positive Behaviour for Learning, helping your child with reading). We want parents to bring their own experiences and skills to the school by providing enrichment activities for students and teachers and involving parents as experts to assist in these activities.

And we will continue to **embed what we do based on parent input and need**, providing support, resources and information that they identify as valuable, and using their feedback from surveys, comments and data from our tools to drive the approaches and opportunities we take.

**We are still working on so many things that will shape the school in years to come.**

## Case Study 8: Macquarie Primary School

Parent engagement at Macquarie Primary School recognises the important roles that both parents and teachers play in children's learning, development, and wellbeing – and that children thrive when there are connections between the different spaces they learn in. A guiding principle of Macquarie Primary School is that learning doesn't just happen between 9am and 3pm. Teachers and school leaders infuse this principle in the design and delivery of learning programs and community events. Particular emphasis is placed on teachers' communication with families, especially through the affordances of technology, such as Google Communities.



### Fostering a culture of parent engagement

- ▶ **Everyone who comes through the door has something to give.** We engage the social capital of parents and families by drawing on their professional and personal expertise to support learning for individuals and the development of whole school strategies and initiatives. We also engage parents and families as co-designers of curriculum through personalised learning planning with teachers. This involves two-way support, where teachers and families provide expert input from different perspectives on the child. Families routinely share students' learning experiences at home, and teachers incorporate these insights into their planning and teaching.
- ▶ **It's always better to over-communicate.** We share information regularly with parents and families through multiple modes of communication, including assemblies, newsletters, online communities, Facebook, hardcopy notes, and the school website. There are also systematic points in the year where the school shares curriculum approaches with parents and families.
- ▶ **Any opportunity or challenge is bigger than just one of us.** Collective efficacy is a major focus at the school. We have a culture of being inquirers – for both students and teachers – and are constantly developing our capacity to learn something together, to reflect on it, and to try again.
- ▶ **Learning doesn't just happen between 9 and 3.** We recognise that real contexts lead to real learning, and that students are learning amazing things outside of school. Our teachers honour and respect the knowledge that children acquire outside the classroom.

*"Students bring rich and diverse life world experiences, and teachers and schools need to know how to use those experiences to springboard learning."*

Wendy Cave, Principal

## Parent engagement in action: Macquarie's Community Languages Initiative



***“One of the things I love about Macquarie Primary School is the diversity of the community that we belong to.”***

Drawing on the school's strength as a linguistically diverse school (approximately 40 per cent of the school community speaks a language or dialect additional to English at home), the leadership and teaching team envisioned a language program that could capitalise on the existing knowledge of students and families – and actively involve families in its design and delivery.

One of our parents is an Australian Sign Language (Auslan) interpreter with extensive connections to the Deaf community. She teaches Auslan at school and provides students with opportunities to use what they learn with native signers in Canberra. Another of our parents is from Cambodia, and comes into the school to run Khmer cooking workshops, where he teaches students about Cambodia's food, language, culture, and history. Aboriginal members of our school community also come to the school to teach the languages Ngunnawal and Wiradjuri.

In 2017, each teaching team from K – 6 has engaged in

learning a target language from the Australian Curriculum. In line with service design methodology, the initiative is prototyping multiple different forms of community-supported language learning. These include families:

- ▶ Supporting strategic planning
- ▶ Supplying language learning resources
- ▶ Co-delivering teaching episodes with teachers
- ▶ Co-constructing curriculum scope and sequences
- ▶ Providing teachers with professional learning in languages.



In particular, Macquarie Primary School is focused on ensuring that children love language learning, that children feel competent, that children engage with communities that speak the language, and that children engage with authentic texts.

***“How do we maintain that commitment to transculturalism, understanding the relationship between language and culture, and building skills in the target language?”***

Brendan Briggs, Deputy Principal

## Parent engagement in action: The Playground Enhancement Project

In 2015, our school started investigating playgrounds and their importance in the emotional and physical wellbeing of children. Contemporary thinking draws a connection between active, inspiring, multidimensional playgrounds and the formation of positive social behaviour, physical health, and improved learning.



In order to enhance our playground, we capitalised on the interests and skills of parents in the school community. The parents who were involved in the project had expertise in play-based learning, landscaping, architecture, urban planning, and health and fitness. Some of the improvements underway include new gateways, a grass mounding, climbing boulders, an amphitheatre, and a bush tucker garden.

A parent who has been heavily involved said, "I love the idea of making the world a better place one step at a time and one person at a time.

What better opportunity to do so than at Macquarie Primary School with a very positive perspective of engaging children and making them part of a sustainable outdoor improvement process?"

***"I have two children at Macquarie Primary and am proud to be working with the school community to create a space where children are drawn into positive, creative and happy play."***

*Parent*

### What have we learned along the way?

- ▶ Promoting and modelling learning assets in engaging with families: Thinking, Self-managing, Researching, Collaborating, and Communicating.
- ▶ Living the school values of honesty, kindness, respect, acceptance, cooperation, and responsibility – and using them as talking points for highlighting strengths and resolving complex situations.
- ▶ Acknowledging that every member of our school community is a lifelong learner.
- ▶ Recognising and drawing upon the social, not financial, capital that all of our families bring.
- ▶ Positioning learners and learning at the heart of everything we do.

***"I like that MPS is taking such good care of creative learners. I like hearing the teacher of my dyslexic daughter telling me all about her dyslexia discoveries and strategies. Thanks for being such a good school for my daughter and her siblings."***

*Parent*

## Case Study 9: Alfred Deakin High School

At Alfred Deakin High School, previous school survey results had shown some parents did not feel as involved in decision-making and learning with their children as they wanted to. Since that point the school has worked tirelessly to build a culture of engagement, offering avenues for parents to be regularly informed about what is happening at school and how they can engage in their child's learning. This has borne fruit as survey results track upwards and opportunities for engagement grow.



Alfred Deakin High School welcomes all new students and wishes everyone a great year

***“Alfred Deakin High School places a high priority on engaging with the community and increasing community partnerships in student learning. By working together as a strong community, we are able to provide our students with excellent educational and social experiences.”***

Belinda Bartlett, Principal

### Building a parent engagement culture

- ▶ **We place a high priority on engaging with the community** and increasing community partnerships in student learning. This is something that has been embedded in our strategic plan over the last few years, following feedback from parents that we could do more. We measure how we are performing and track where we are heading, so that we can evolve in a cycle of continuous improvement.
- ▶ **We aim to ensure parents and carers have access to the best possible information.** This means communicating regularly and flexibly, using multiple avenues to keep parents informed. With parents across what is happening at school and what their child is learning, they are in a better position to engage with their child and the school.
- ▶ **We encourage and provide time for open communication between teachers and parents.** Staff regularly communicate via phone or email in an ongoing manner to parents. This communication can vary in content, but will usually be in the form of a weekly email of topic coverage and tasks, of evidence of learning tasks that students are expected to complete that week, or of an individual's social and emotional progress over a short period of time.

***“We'd like to pay more than just lip service with that partnership around education. And so all of the executive staff encourage that personal contact between teachers and parents.”***

Alex Nagy, Deputy Principal

- **We offer multiple opportunities to educate parents as partners in learning.** The school hosts a series of forums, sessions and events throughout the year to share what we are doing at school and how parents can support this at home. We have embraced technology as a platform to share student activities, requirements and progress with their families.
- **We listen and are sensitive to context and need in building up relationships with families.** Our weekly phone home initiative allows families to talk about their own situation and flag any challenges or concerns. We start these conversations early in their school life to build trust and rapport, making it easier to manage any issues down the line. We are conscious of equity and support parents of students with disability, learning difficulties, complex needs or challenging behaviour in engaging in their child's specific learning plans and program.

## Providing a range of opportunities for parent engagement



**We hold at least five parent forums a year,** continuing our efforts to educate the whole school community in new technology in education, pathways for students, and in how the Australian Curriculum has improved the way we assess and report on student achievement.

**The Google online learning platform (GAFE) Parent Portal** was developed to strengthen communication with parents. New information tabs were recently added to the Portal to assist parents to view student learning portfolios, course outlines, elective options and processes, preferred devices and the ETD policies regarding the use of ICT in schools.

**Google Classroom and Google Guardian** act as an enabler for the school, student and parent partnership in learning. Parents are given access to the learning platform via their student and can see how they are progressing with creating new knowledge in learning artefacts. This affords a greater detail of information than, in some cases, can be acquired through questioning a child at the end of a day.

**Phone home initiative** – at the commencement of each year all year 7 Tutor Group teachers phone their students' parents / carers to initiate a potential four year relationship with the family. All Tutor Group teachers in years 8-10 either phone or email parents at this time. Feedback from parents informs us that this initiative has been most appreciated.

**Other communication streams**, including regular global emails, the Deakin Digest (3 per term in digital format), social media (*Facebook* and *Twitter*) and our website. Year coordinators issue a short report of activities through a global email to year groups at least once per term, and more as required.

**Reporting to parents** – we formally report four times a year to parents (progress reports at the end of terms 1 and 3 and summative reports at the end of terms 2 and 4). Letters of concern are issued to parents twice a year if a student is not progressing as expected across their range of learning areas.

**We hold parent-teacher evenings once a semester** for three hours to assist parents to access direct contact with their child's teachers in one evening. We also hold three **assemblies** per term, including for NAIDOC.

**Volunteer opportunities for parents**, including in our E-Hub (Library), canteen and on excursions, as well as assistance at carnivals, sports and other school events.

## Parent engagement in action: Parent forums

At Alfred Deakin High School we have developed parent forums as an interface in which we collectively share and discuss topics of interest. We have embedded these into the school calendar, running at least five forums across the year. Through the forums we are continuing our work to educate the whole school community in new technology in education, in pathways in education for students, in new approaches to education, and to address concerns and improvements we as a school can make. We also celebrate what we do well!

***“Collectively, these forums were attended by approximately 1,200 parents in 2016.”***

Belinda Bartlett, Principal

A number of the forums have become established as regular events on our calendar each year:

- ▶ **A Year 7 ‘Meet the Teacher’ evening** where parents follow a mini timetable and visit each of their student’s classes. This offers the opportunity to share and discuss learning expectations and for parents to become familiar with the high school environment.
- ▶ **A Year 10 Parent Forum** that outlines the Year 10 program including expectations for the awarding of certificates, Road Ready, Work experience, flexible learning options, and college enrolment timelines.
- ▶ **College information sessions** in which principals from two local colleges talk to parents about the transition to, and pathways into, college.
- ▶ **A GAFE information and skills acquisition evening** designed to introduce new parents to the online learning environment at our school and how students and staff coordinate their learning materials and submission of assignments. A GAFE forum for prospective Year 7 students and their parents has also been provided, focusing on GAFE, Bring Your Own Device and Digital Citizenship.
- ▶ **Open night and information session on the school Unicorn program** (for gifted and talented students) for all interested and prospective parents and students.

Forums are also held as required, **driven by current issues and identified needs of the school community**. Recent examples include forums on the electronic monitoring of student attendance and how parents can work in partnership with school to manage student attendance, Australian curriculum assessment and reporting, overseas and national excursions, and cyber safety.

It can take time to build up and embed such forums into the school culture. Our first ever forum had something like six parents...now they are spilling out into the corridor! We found **it was critical that all staff engage in the process and it's not just delivered by the executive** – parents want to hear from and work with the teachers who see their children every day. And of course, the timing and venue is important. The forums take place in the evenings and we **try to combine these with other events where parents are on the school premises** – for instance when there is a school disco and they would be dropping off their children anyway.

***“Through [the forums] we’ve been able to communicate the issues a bit better with parents. Because even if they don’t come to the forums we are putting it out in various ways that this is what’s happening.”***

Alex Nagy, Deputy Principal

## What have we learned along the way?

We placed a deliberate focus on improving our engagement with the community and this takes commitment and resources. However, the upturn in survey results shows the progress we've made and reaffirms our commitment to parent engagement.



**Critical factors** in building engagement with parents have included:

- ▶ **Linking Parent Engagement to our school strategy** and tracking how we are going against this. This signified a commitment and value placed on parent engagement and ensured it became embedded into our operational plan.
- ▶ **Engaging from the outset**, as soon as or before students and their parents enter the school. This has been facilitated through our forums and the establishment of relationships through the phone home initiative. Building trust and rapport from day one has helped to build three way conversations between school, student and parent.
- ▶ **Setting clear, realistic protocols that are achievable for our staff**. Being realistic in how much teachers can communicate with parents and setting protocols in terms of type and frequency of engagement. Allowing staff the time to communicate with parents on a weekly basis has been essential.
- ▶ **Being dynamic and flexible in communication**. Things change and parents interact with the school in different ways. Providing multiple points of interaction and regular dissemination of information helps to manage the natural course of events in a busy, diverse high school.

## Taking parent engagement forward...



A lot of what we do heading into the future is about carrying on the progress we have made, and ensuring this is even more strongly embedded into the culture. **Making parent engagement a natural thing that happens as soon as a parent first becomes a part of our community is the goal.**

We are cognisant that not all parents are strongly engaged with the school or their children's learning. Some face challenges and are struggling at home. We'd like to do more to bring these parents in and engage them, to **ensure greater equity among all members of our community**. We need to be thinking about strategies to mitigate against that divide.

Making parent engagement a key part of our school strategy and operational plan offers a focus and commitment to this important area. Feedback and data from parents can reaffirm what we are doing, but also offer opportunities for enhancing our approach. We'd like to **reflect more of what we do in what parents want** – for instance, in content provided in the parent forums. And we see the **opportunities provided by technology**, and anticipate building on this as a way to connect with parents and engage them in their child's learning into the future.

## Appendix: Case Study Template

### **Thanks for agreeing to showcase how you positively engage with parents and families in your school community!**

By sharing exemplar approaches and strategies from your school, you will assist in promoting and enhancing the practice of parent engagement across ACT schools. This document provides instruction and guidance for providing this feedback through the enclosed case study template.

#### **What will the case study look like?**

The case studies will be professionally designed and formatted and extend to 3-4 pages, including **accompanying images. The design will be undertaken by ARACY so don't worry too much about this** in the template! We will work with your school to gather any photos and ensure the case study accurately and positively reflects what you are doing and presents this in an engaging way.

#### **What do we need from you?**

Please go through the template and respond to the question areas posed in the space provided. In particular we would like you to share details about:

- Your school's overarching philosophy and culture in relation to Parent Engagement;
- The key strategies and approaches you have in place across the school;
- One or two practical examples of Parent Engagement successfully in action;
- What you consider to have been the critical success factors to Parent Engagement; and
- How you might continue to sustain and enhance Parent Engagement moving forward.

#### **Supporting information to help complete the template**

The ACT Government resource developed in conjunction with ARACY: [Progressing Parent Engagement School Fact Sheet](#) provides a useful reference point in which to consider your case study. In particular:

- The types of parent engagement taking place and outcomes achieved, structured according to Epstein's framework (pp.3-4)
- The case study example provided by Monash Primary School (pp.5-6)

## 1. A Parent Engagement culture

Please briefly outline the philosophy and approach your school has towards Parent Engagement (PE). For example:

- Why is PE important to your school?
- How is PE embedded in the school culture and practices?
- How do you demonstrate the value of engagement with parents and families?
- How are parents and families made to feel welcome as part of the school?

Insert text

Ideally provide a Principal's statement regarding Parent Engagement:

"Insert statement" (Principal Name)

## 2. Key Parent Engagement strategies

Please outline the kinds of approaches and strategies you have put in place in your school which have been observed to foster and sustain parent engagement. These may address one or more of the following areas:

- A) PARENTING: Strategies that assist families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students.
- B) COMMUNICATING: Strategies that help to promote effective two-way communications among schools, families, and community members or groups about student programs and student progress.
- C) VOLUNTEERING: Strategies that organise and support family and community members in their efforts to support the school and its students.
- D) LEARNING AT HOME: Strategies that assist families to boost home-learning conditions to support student academic achievement by involving families with their children on homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions.
- E) DECISION-MAKING: Strategies that include families and community members as partners in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.
- F) COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY: Strategies that coordinate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development, and provide services to the community

Insert text

- Bullet point examples of strategies and practices

### 3. Showcase Parent Engagement successfully in action

Please provide one or two 'case study' examples (e.g. programs, initiatives, events, activities, policies and practices) which showcase how your school successfully engages parents and families and would demonstrate 'good practice' to other schools in the ACT.

For each consider outlining:

- How and why this came about? (e.g. was there a need identified, how did you decide to implement this, who drove this, and who was involved in developing and implementing?)
- What happened / has taken place?
- What outcome / impacts has this had on parent engagement as a whole
- What outcome / impacts has this had on (a) on parents / families, (b) on teachers and other staff, (c) on the school as a whole, (d) on students
- What were the key things which made it work / critical success factors?
- What might you have done / do differently to make it even better?

Insert text for case study example 1

Which of the following outcomes did this address? (Refer to framework identified in Part 2 above)

- PARENTING
- COMMUNICATING
- VOLUNTEERING
- LEARNING AT HOME
- DECISION-MAKING
- COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY
- OTHER (SPECIFY) \_\_\_\_\_

Insert text for case study example 2 (if available)

Which of the following outcomes did this address? (Refer to framework identified in Part 2 above)

- PARENTING
- COMMUNICATING
- VOLUNTEERING
- LEARNING AT HOME
- DECISION-MAKING
- COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY
- OTHER (SPECIFY) \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Critical success factors

Summarise in bullet point form the key four or five factors that have led to successful parent engagement in your school as a whole

- Critical success factor 1
- Critical success factor 2
- Critical success factor 3
- Critical success factor 4
- Critical success factor 5

#### 5. Sustaining and improving engagement

Briefly outline any future plans and strategies you are intending to develop and implement to further enhance parent engagement in your school

Insert text



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