Parent Engagement in ACT Schools

Good Practice Case Studies Report

June 2017

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Families ACT

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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

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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[1].

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

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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 findings in this paper 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 Appendices).

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:

- Isabella Plains ECS
- Lyons ECS
- Narrabundah ECS
- Southern Cross ECS
- Ainslie School

- Bonython Primary School
- Charles Weston Primary School
- Macquarie Primary School
- Alfred Deakin High School

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

Type 1 – Parenting	Helping families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students These strategies also assist schools to better understand families
Type 2 – Communicating	Designing effective two-way communications between school and parents to engage all parents regularly
Type 3 – Volunteering	Recruiting volunteer parents to help in school, in classes and in extra-curricular activities
Type 4 – Learning at home	Providing good information to enable all parents to help with homework and offer other family learning activities
Type 5 – Decision Making	Strategies that include families and community members as partners in school decisions to build a sense of ownership, including being involved in governance
Type 6 – Collaboration with Community	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. The 'Good Practice Case Studies' Project

The strategies shared by the schools that engaged in this study demonstrated a number of core approaches that reflected the key practices suggested by Epstein's framework. In particular, a number of schools demonstrated a holistic strategy that emphasised building parental competencies, confidence and comfort in a way that empowered families to engage in their children's learning. This was particularly apparent in those schools that employ a dedicated community liaison officer (or similar role), make use of relationships with on-site community organisations, create a welcoming environment (through the use of dedicated family/community rooms, aesthetically pleasing spaces, and warm staff demeanour), and reduce the number of barriers parents face in communicating with school leadership.

2.1   A note on Early Childhood Schools

Approximately half of the participating schools in the study were Early Childhood Schools (ECSs). This unique model of school in the ACT caters for children from birth to eight years (Year 2), and these schools naturally lend themselves to parent engagement practices through their warm, welcoming, and nurturing environments. Forming strong relationships with families and providing interconnected support is explicitly embedded within their missions, strategies and values.

Evidence shows that effective parent engagement, and in particular the engagement of families at risk of disengagement, is best achieved through an approach that focuses on relationships, involves partnerships between professionals and parents, provides parents with choices regarding strategies, builds parental competencies, is non-stigmatising, demonstrates cultural awareness and sensitivity, and maintains continuity of care (Moore, McDonald, Sanjeevan & Price, 2012). Indeed many of these aspects are evident across the ECSs, which makes these schools particularly exemplary in their parent engagement practices. Key aspects of the ECSs in this study include:

Welcoming environment: Their overarching approach and philosophy is child-centred and they are explicit in their belief that children are inextricably linked to the environment around them, and that the different environments in a child's world, such as home and school, cannot be separated.

> *"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 – Lyons Early Childhood School)

Building Connections: In the ECS model, relationships and connections are front and centre of school life, and the value placed on families as first teachers is paramount to the way these schools operate. They honour their families by treating them with respect, and put a great deal of effort into ensuring families feel welcomed into the school – which is seen as an extension of family life and a rich resource for the community to use.

> *"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."* (Lyndall Read, Principal – Southern Cross Early Childhood School)

Community coordinator / liaison role: A defining feature of these schools is the dedicated member of staff in a community engagement role, allowing the school to pay particular attention to the building of relationships and connections with families, and supporting families in a range of ways. This is a significant asset to each of the ECSs, and its benefits are evident in myriad ways.

> *"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 – Isabella Plains Early Childhood School)

Trust: A further notable characteristic of these schools is the high level of trust that is built up between families and their school over time, an investment that sometimes takes years. This is enabled by connections that are forged through the opportunities created by these schools to connect with their families.

> *"Learning sometimes is hard and kids need to stick with us, and we need to help kids to stick with us, and that's why parent engagement is so important. Because it builds that platform that we can all hold onto together. We're in this together with the child and their family."* (Lyndall Read, Principal – Southern Cross Early Childhood School)

2.2   Parent engagement strategies and approaches

The schools were asked to respond to a range of questions designed to elicit their experiences of effective parent engagement practices, such as their school's overarching philosophy and culture in relation to parent engagement. Schools were then asked to consider and collate the key strategies and approaches in place against the six typologies

within Epstein's framework (Epstein, 2009). Key examples reported in the case studies are provided in the sections to follow.

Type 1: Parenting

This domain involves supporting families with parenting skill development and ensuring that schools better understand families. The benefit of schools providing families with opportunities to bolster their parenting skills is that it supports self-confidence about parenting as children proceed through school, as well as knowledge of child and adolescent development. Seen through another lens, it also enables families to share information with schools about background, culture, talents, goals, and needs. Schools gain insights into families' goals and concerns for children, and ideally respect for families' strengths and efforts.

The ECSs in the study appeared well placed to support this domain, with the community partnerships in particular enabling the provision of training and support programs to parents and families, as well as interconnected support.

Key examples of approaches within the parenting domain include:

- Parenting workshops and courses offered at the ECSs in collaboration with community organisations, such as *Parents as Teachers*, *Circle of Security Parenting*, *Tuning into Kids*, *Cool Little Kids*, and *UrFAB*, which focuses on understanding and responding to feelings and behaviours. These courses are aimed at developing better understanding about child development, mental health and wellbeing.

- *Freshen it Up*, a program run at Narrabundah ECS and developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families at the school, which aims to improve their awareness of healthy eating and access to fresh produce.

- Supporting families by providing an integrated service.

  "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 – Narrabundah Early Childhood 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 Early Childhood School)

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"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."*
(Narrabundah Early Childhood School)

Case study snaphot – Peace Table at Lyons Early Childhood School

Lyons ECS's Restorative Practices model aims to translate the use of a Peace Table from school to home, supporting parents to develop a relationship-focused approach to behaviour management and support.

Peace Table allows the school to share with the parent community what has been learnt about evidence-based best practice. The approach guides teachers, children and parents to build, maintain and restore relationships. It encourages children to play a part in 'repairing the harm', teaches them to self regulate their behaviour and contributes to a positive school experience.

> *"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'. 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 – Lyons ECS)

> *"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, Lyons ECS)

Type 2: Communicating

All the schools that took part in the report placed an emphasis on varied and ongoing communication. This takes the form of online, phone, and in-person communication that is both general and targeted, as indicated below.

Form of communication	General	Targeted
Online	• Newsletters (also printed off and often placed in the front office) • Emails • School Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts	• Apps such as *SeeSaw* and *Storypark,* which allow students to share examples of their work with their parents over the course of the day • Google Classroom • Direct emails
In person	• Information sessions for families on a range of topics • Informal daily contact with teachers and school leadership during pick up and drop off • Daily gatherings held each morning for children and families to share what is happening that day • School-based events, e.g. community breakfasts, family picnics, campouts	• Meet the Teacher/ Getting to Know You interview at the start of each year • Regular three-way conferences • Open-door policy with regards to meetings • Care meetings for students with complex needs, with all the people involved in the learning & development of the child • Community Coordinator meetings
Phone		• Introductory phone calls at the start of each year to encourage ongoing communication

Communication is critically important to successful parent engagement practice by schools, and the study demonstrated rich and diverse examples of positive work happening in this area, including 'good news' phone calls, the translation of key documentation for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) families, providing regular informal opportunities for parents to ask questions and seek support, identifying and removing educational jargon from newsletters and other school documentation, and seeking to remove 'adminisitrivia' more generally. Key examples of approaches to communicating are mentioned below.

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Welcoming environment: How well a school environment welcomes its families – particularly those who have had negative experiences of the education system – communicates a great deal about the extent to which they are valued by the school and feel they are recognised as partners in their child's education. A number of schools in the study emphasised the importance of their front desk staff and the atmosphere of the reception/ foyer area as critical to creating a family-friendly school, conveying that it is a fun, safe and important place to be.

Examples included offering an open and inviting space for families to make a cup of tea and sit down to chat, a flat screen in reception with an array of images of students engaged in various school-based activities on a loop (rather than just screening informational notices), front desk staff taking pride in remembering the names of family members and making each person feel welcome at the school, and the principal standing in a central position to chat to families at the end of the day as they head home.

Selected quotes from the case studies highlight this sense of creating an environment that makes families feel recognised as partners in their child's education:

> *"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."* (Isabella Plains Early Childhood School)

> *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."* (Narrabundah Early Childhood School)

> *"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."* (Ainslie School)

> *"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." (Charles Weston School)

"We have developed Parent Forums as an interface in which we collectively share and discuss topics of interest. Several have been embedded into our school calendar: A Year 7 'Meet the Teacher' evening where parents follow a mini timetable and visit each of their student's classes 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 outlines the Year 10 program including expectations for the awarding of certificates, Road Ready, Work experience, flexible learning options, and college enrolment timelines." (Alfred Deakin High School)

Online platforms to connect home and school: Digital communication appears to be a significant (and growing) component of day to day communication between many schools and their families, and several online platforms were mentioned in the case studies, such as *Google Communities/Classroom*, *SeeSaw* and *Storypark*, in addition to a presence on social media (Facebook, Instagram).

Schools recognise that families are increasingly busy and that innovative solutions are required to connect school and home. Digital communication appears to be most successful when it is tailored to the individual classroom and/ or child, providing parents with targeted information about the school day. This empowers families by providing scaffolds to enrich the parent-child conversation, by supporting a child's learning in context with what is happening during the school day – a fundamental aspect of positive parent engagement practice.

Selected quotes from the case studies highlights the growing importance that online platforms are beginning to have in some ACT schools:

"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 is 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." (Bonython Primary School)

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

> *"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, Charles Weston School)

> *"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 Education Directorate's policies regarding the use of ICT in schools."* (Alfred Deakin High School)

Inclusive communication: In considering the strategies for communication with, and inclusion of, their EALD families, schools provided excellent examples. One school was in the process of scheduling focus groups with parents to examine this issue, drawing from a cross section of families for their advice and expertise. They had also drawn on the more confident EALD families to assist with translating documents, such as the canteen menu, and hoped to build on that. Another school provided opportunities through their canteen to bring EALD parents together to practise their English in an enjoyable and non-threatening way.

> *" 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."* (Ainslie School)

Creatively communicating: Some schools employ creative techniques to foster and maintain communication. At the end of the holidays, for example, Southern Cross ECS sends a postcard to every child enrolled at the school with a personal message from their teacher. This reminds the family about school starting, lets the child know their teacher is thinking of them, and encourages positive communication between the teacher and the family.

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"My kindy kid was so excited to get a postcard from her new teacher; I think you won a heart with that one." (Parent, Southern Cross Early Childhood School, comment from Facebook page)

Selected quotes from the case studies highlight the diverse ways that 'creatively communicating' is occurring across ACT schools:

"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." (Ainslie School)

"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." (Bonython Primary School)

"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." (Ainslie School)

"The 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." (Alfred Deakin High School)

Community coordinator/ liaison role: Research carried out by the Centre for Educational Research at Western Sydney University identified that a particularly effective parent engagement strategy is the leveraging of relationships with community organisations, and the importance of a community liaison officer to building and maintaining family-school partnerships (Woodrow, Somerville, Naidoo, & Power, 2016).

Most of the ECSs in the study identified the role of a community coordinator or liaison officer (or similar) as central to the ongoing communication not only between the school and families, but also amongst the families themselves. Where school resources allow,

this role appears to be instrumental in supporting and enhancing teacher and parent capacity to communicate with one another.

> *"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 – Narrabundah Early Childhood 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."* (Lyndall Read, Principal –Southern Cross Early Childhood School)

Type 3: Volunteering

While research indicates that volunteering and participating in events at school is less important in the parent engagement equation than supporting learning at home, being part of a child's school community is one way that parents and families can demonstrate to students that education and learning is valued. Further, research has indicated that in some cases getting parents involved at the school level can be an important catalyst to engaging them to support their child's learning at home (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Common to a number of the schools is the annual appointment of class-parent representatives ('class carers') who create a welcoming informal network of support, an additional means of communication between families and the school, and a means by which to encourage further communication and collaboration between the families themselves. In addition, parents' associations act as representative and advocacy groups for the families.

Most schools draw on the skills and capacities of parents to both further encourage and make use of parent engagement in order to improve student outcomes and experiences. Some exemplars provided in the case studies included:

- The language program at Macquarie Primary School, which utilises the abilities of parents to provide a range of language learning opportunities and experiences for students such as Australian Sign Language (Auslan) and Khmer

> *"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." (Macquarie Primary School)

- A series of 'lunchtime learning clubs' run at Southern Cross ECS are parent and community led

- The Ainslie School canteen is run by parent volunteers, many of whom are learning English.

These examples not only use the skills of the school community but also create avenues for parents to develop their sense of empowerment and belonging within the school community. Ideally schools will offer a range of opportunities for all parents to contribute their time and talents.

Further quotes from the case studies highlight some other examples of volunteering being used to improve student outcomes and experiences:

> *"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."* (Macquarie Primary School)

> *"In 2015 a group of Ainslie School parents worked to put together a cookbook – 'Ainslie Food' – of their recipes. This is sold to raise funds for the school's outdoor grounds.* (Ainslie School)

Type 4: Learning at Home

This domain includes both building parent capacity to support children in their learning at home, as well as developing strategies to allow parents to easily and regularly know what their children are learning at school in order to inform home learning and support.

Each of the schools in the study runs practical workshops and information sessions to provide parents with skills or knowledge to best support their children's learning. These sessions may inform parents of the strategies used in the classroom in order to facilitate continuity in learning, they may provide parents with opportunities to model literacy or numeracy skills, or they may educate parents in key strategies that will enable them to better and more explicitly connect home and school learning.

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Most schools in the study are in the process of introducing, or had recently introduced, innovative online platforms, such as *Google Classroom*, into their teaching structures, to allow parents to track their children's progress and remain informed about what and how they are learning. These platforms promote the parent-child conversation about learning, optimising family-led learning opportunities (see earlier discussion in 'Online platforms to connect home and school').

Given that the research indicates that it is what parents do in the home learning environment that has the greatest influence on student achievement (rather than parent participation in school-based activities), these online tools have the capacity to offer game-changing opportunities to families and schools in the parent engagement arena.

Further quotes from the case studies provide other examples of how schools maximise opportunities to support the home learning environment:

> *"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 – Isabella Plains Early Childhood School)

> *"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 – Macquarie Primary School)

> *"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."* (Lyndall Read, Principal – Southern Cross Early Childhood School)

> *"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.*
>
> *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. 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." (Lyons Early childhood School)

"Read with Me café – parents and children can attend the school library every Friday morningto 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." (Southern Cross Early Childhood School)

"We provide access to our 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." (Charles Weston School)

Type 5: Decision Making

Shared decision-making about school policies and students' education is a key element of encouraging and maintaining parent engagement. School culture surveys, for example, can provide insight and direction about new strategies or policies. Ongoing consultation in the development of programs, and in particular programs directed at specific population groups, can enhance take-up and effectiveness. In addition, parent associations provide a structure through which families can advocate for themselves within the school community.

Schools in the study encourage active participation of their parent population in the formal parents' organisation in the school council and/or P&C, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation. Additionally, most of the schools in the study arrange for their school communities to be consulted on new school policies and procedures, e.g. assessment, reporting and curriculum changes, and other ideas.

Several schools use committee groups to increase parental voice in key decisions and work in new areas. Many also discuss the use of parent focus groups to explore ideas and to help gain a better understanding of issues of importance for their school community.

Several quotes from the case studies provide examples of how some schools are encouraging and maintaining parent engagement through decision-making processes:

"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.

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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." (Lyons Early Childhood School)

"*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.*" (Greg Terrell, Principal – Bonython Primary School)

Type 6: Collaboration with Community

Collaboration with Community can take a number of forms. ECSs often engage with, and leverage the resources of, community organisations. In this way they act as central points of contact with services for children and families, while also enhancing engagement and educational opportunities. Narrabundah ECS's partnership with Woden Community service provides weekly appointment or drop-in opportunities with a Case Manager for members of the school and wider community, as well as access to parenting programs.

"*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.*" (Narrabundah Early Childhood School)

"*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, Narrabundah Early Childhood School)

Research carried out by Western Sydney University highlighted that resource pressure on schools, and in particular schools that work with disadvantaged communities, can reduce the ability of educators to focus on parent engagement (Woodrow et al., 2016). The same report suggests that partnerships with community organisations can address this

resource pressure, increase family support and better enable the development of positive family-school partnerships (Woodrow et al., 2016).

Establishing the school as a central hub for services increases the extent to which it is integrated in the wider community, thereby increasing each family's sense of belonging, which enhances family-school partnerships. This integration is further developed through community programs that embrace engagement with different population groups. The *Growing with Grands* initiative at Isabella Plains ECS draws on the gardening skills of members of the neighbouring retirement village to teach children about gardening and connect them to positive role models, providing for some children their sole opportunity for intergenerational connection.

> *"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."* (Isabella Plains Early Childhood School)

Many also integrate school partnerships with cultural groups or government and nongovernment agencies to support activities, such as play group and breakfast clubs, and some schools encourage community use of school facilities, e.g. community rooms, library, halls and gyms.

3. Summary and issues for consideration

As can be seen by the collection of examples included in the previous section, the strategies used to enhance parent engagement by schools are broad and diverse. However, the common factor that can be observed among the schools which participated in the study is their commitment to parent engagement as deliberate and intentional. Each of these schools, regardless of their educational focus (early childhood, primary, secondary) holds parent engagement as a core value, and has it embedded in their culture and practices.

Most of these schools invest a great deal of time and energy in finding rich and valuable opportunities for families to engage, understanding that there is no one option or path that can work for all families. For some, it may be the chance to participate in a 'campout' at school, providing a rare opportunity to chat to the principal over breakfast. For an increasing number of families, however, it is tapping into the digital platform that allows a way 'in' to their child's learning at school during the day, which in turn allows for a more targeted parent-child conversation at the end of the day. The reward is families feeling connected to their child's learning – in partnership with their child's school – and ultimately, an impact on the educational attainment of that child.

What can schools do to progress their parent engagement efforts?

Multiple studies and meta-analyses show that children whose parents are engaged in their learning have higher levels of academic achievement. Parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socio-economic status. This makes it a key tool that can help to close the achievement gap between children of different circumstances and backgrounds (Monti, Pomerantz, & Roisman, 2014).

Developing a clear and comprehensive strategy for parent engagement, in partnership with families, is a good start. This might, as a starting point, include regular activities across each of the six areas presented in Epstein's framework. In reviewing the parent engagement efforts of the schools included in this study, ARACY also suggests the following as important issues for consideration by ACT schools to maximise their parent engagement efforts for the benefit of students:

- Embed a culture of relationship-based engagement, underpinned by strong home-school partnerships that honour parents as equal decision-makers and valuable contributors to the school team

- Develop the capacity of school educators to work with families and community members by offering knowledge exchange opportunities for staff, including principals, to share learning about successful practices

- Provide training to all staff in evidence based, holistic, strengths-based approaches to support communication and relationships with young people and their families

- Where resourcing allows, provide dedicated staff members as community liaison officers (or similar) to act as key contact points for families and schools, to build both teacher and parent capacity to communicate with one another

- Partner with community organisations to help build the bridge between schools and their families, thereby enhancing family-school partnerships.

These points are discussed in further detail below.

Embedding a culture of relationship-based engagement

The most important issue is that a culture of relationship-based engagement must be integrated and embedded within schools, with mandated requirements written into school plans, to ensure effective parent engagement as a school priority and articulating the roles and responsibilities for all staff. Developing and implementing strategies for parent engagement in partnership *with* parents is ideal.

Parent engagement requires a whole-of-school approach, but leadership makes the difference. A school's parent engagement culture needs to start with school leadership in order to permeate to all staff.

Developing the parent engagement capacity of school educators

Educators with sufficient communication skills and understanding of the benefits of parent engagement are critical to fostering positive home-school partnerships for the promotion of student outcomes. Therefore, further developing the capacity of school educators to work with families and community members should be an important consideration of schools.

Good teaching practices include the ability to form and foster strong relationships, not only with the students, but with their families and other community members. This is even more important when it comes to fostering relationships with families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, refugee or migrant families, families of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, and those from other marginalised groups.

Schools should consider offering knowledge exchange opportunities for all teaching staff, including principals, to share learning about successful parent engagement practices. In addition, they should provide training to all staff in evidence based, holistic, strengths-based approaches to support communication and relationships with all young people and their families.

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There is also value in educators being encouraged to work with colleagues from other schools to share 'what works' in parent engagement practice across different school communities.

Community coordinator/ liaison role

Where resourcing allows, the appointment of a dedicated staff member – community coordinator, liaison officer (or similar) appears to make a significant positive impact – as a link between parents and the school in order to build both teacher and parent capacity to communicate with one another. This is optimal where there are families facing particular challenges. One principal in this study stated emphatically that she would 'never' again work in a school which did not provide resourcing for this role, because of the important focus on connection that the role provides.

Ideally the community coordinator role not only supports its families, particularly connecting them with services where appropriate, but also engages with the school community and broader community for the benefit of the school's students.

The value of community organisations

In addition to the role of a community liaison officer on staff, community-based organisations can build a bridge between schools and their families, enhancing family-school partnerships. They can also work to address the basic needs of 'at-risk' children by connecting families to resources and programs, taking the pressure off schools.

Community organisations consulted in recent research (Woodrow et al, 2016) presented different models of working across sites and schools, but the key elements involved supporting families and children to succeed in the school environment. They often resulted in dedicated spaces in the school for families, better developed transition programs from pre-school or primary school, and supportive social networks amongst parents.

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Appendix 1: 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 sc**hool'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: <u>Progressing Parent Engagement School Fact Sheet</u> 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)

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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

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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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