

# Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research.



## Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau

A report by the Australian Research Alliance  
for Children & Youth for the Family-School  
and Community Partnerships Bureau.

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## Foreword

In 2004, the Australian Parents Council (APC) and the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) persuaded the Australian Government to invest in the development of a national *Family-School Partnerships Framework*. Trialled in 61 schools in 2005, the framework was endorsed by all State, Territory and Federal Education Ministers in 2008.

The Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau was also established in 2008. A joint initiative of ACSSO and APC, its purpose is to share promising practice, conduct research and provide practical support and advice to parents, principals, teachers and other education stakeholders.

The Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau is particularly excited to launch this publication, *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research*.

A substantial contribution in Australian and international contexts, this paper pulls together the research on parental engagement, highlights the benefits, demonstrates what works, and identifies strategies available to facilitate parental engagement.

Following on from this research, APC and ACSSO will continue working collaboratively with the Australian Government to explore policy options to further embed parental engagement within the education reform agenda.

As well, we are working in partnership with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to identify common practices amongst teachers and school leaders that catalyse and sustain effective parental engagement in students' learning.

On the basis of available evidence, this paper concludes that positive parental engagement in learning improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity.

It further concludes that resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to, education reform and the future of Australia.

We take this opportunity to thank Dr Lance Emerson and his team at the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. We deeply appreciate ARACY's commitment and expertise in bringing together the best 'thinkers and doers' to examine evidence and experience on what is needed to help young Australians reach their full potential.



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President  
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President  
Australian Council of State School Organisations



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## Executive Summary

### About this report

The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau commissioned the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to identify evidence on the benefits of positive parental engagement, what works to promote positive parental engagement, and the strategies available to policy-makers wishing to facilitate such engagement.

This report provides a synopsis of the published literature pertaining to parental engagement in both the home and school environments. On the basis of the evidence in the literature, it identifies those approaches which have the greatest influence and impact on student outcomes.

Given the clear benefits of positive parental engagement in student learning, by way of improved academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, the report concludes that resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to education reform and the future of Australia.

### What is parental engagement?

Formal education is one of many ways that children learn and develop. The learning trajectory begins well before children enter school, and once children are attending school, they continue to learn at home, and in the community. Parents play a critical role in providing learning opportunities at home and in linking what children learn at school with what happens elsewhere. By participating in and facilitating diverse learning experiences and activities outside the school, parents become an important factor in children's overall learning and education.

Considered broadly, parental engagement consists of partnerships between families, schools and communities, raising parental awareness of the benefits of engaging in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so. As Muller (2009) states: *'Family-school and community partnerships are re-defining the boundaries and functions of education. They enlarge parental and community capacity; they create conditions in which children learn more effectively. In these ways they take education beyond the school gates'*.

### Comparing the impact of home and school on children's learning

One main objective of this report is to examine available evidence on the relative influence of home and school on learning outcomes. Specifically, it has been suggested that the relative influence of the home on student achievement is 60-80 per cent, while the school accounts for 20-40 per cent. A likely source for this assertion is the field of study known as School Effectiveness Research (SER) which examines the contribution that schools make to student achievement and the processes through which these contributions occur.

SER originally arose in response to the landmark Coleman Report (1966) in the United States and the Plowden Report (1967) in the United Kingdom, which both asserted that schools make little difference to student outcomes. Since that time, many studies have confirmed that family background and other non-school factors are more influential than schools in determining academic outcomes. Due to the

wide variety of statistical methods employed by researchers, different studies arrive at different estimates of the magnitude of 'school effects', but these tend to sit between the 8-15 per cent range.

In reviewing the literature, there are many difficulties in precisely quantifying the relative influence of parental engagement. These include: differences in parental engagement definitions across studies; lack of standardisation of parental engagement approaches (thereby making it impossible to 'tease apart' or isolate the relative impact of home and school); and lack of agreed measures of parental engagement.

It is therefore problematic to simply assert that the school accounts for 20-40 per cent (or 8-15 per cent) of the variation in achievement and the 'home' accounts for the remaining 40-60 per cent (or 85-92 per cent). Significantly, it should be emphasised that factors beyond the 'school' (that is, whatever variability remains after the 8-15 per cent which can be influenced by the school) do not necessarily correspond with 'home'. 'Non-school' factors can include fixed variables such as genetic predisposition, family background, social status and location, as well as factors amenable to change, such as the level of parental engagement in learning and material resources available to support learning.

Nevertheless, there is strong consensus, supported by a variety of evidence dating from over 40 years, that positive parental engagement can and does significantly influence student academic attainment.

### **The impact of parental engagement**

While research supports the notion that parental engagement may positively impact student academic attainment, there is an important distinction between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning; it is the latter that has shown to have the greatest positive impact. While involving parents in school activities may have an important community and social function, the key to facilitating positive change in a child's academic attainment is the engagement of parents in learning outcomes in the home.

International research has shown that parental engagement (of various kinds) has a positive impact on many indicators of student achievement, including:

- higher grades and test scores,
- enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes,
- higher successful completion of classes,
- lower drop-out rates,
- higher graduation rates, and
- a greater likelihood of commencing postsecondary education.

Beyond educational achievement, parental engagement is associated with various indicators of student development. These include:

- more regular school attendance,
- better social skills,
- improved behaviour,
- better adaptation to school,
- increased social capital,
- a greater sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning,



- greater engagement in school work, and
- a stronger belief in the importance of education.

In one of the very few studies which have used economic modelling to examine the impact of parental engagement, Houtenville and Conway (2008) found that *parental effort* (the combination of all kinds of engagement) has a large effect on student achievement compared with *school resources* (e.g. per pupil spending on teaching). The magnitude of this effect was equivalent to more than \$1,000 in per-pupil spending per annum, and improved academic outcomes to levels equivalent to those of students whose parents had received an additional four to six years of education.

### How parental engagement influences student outcomes

The literature supports the assertion that parents' attitudes, behaviours, and actions in relation to their children's education have a substantial impact on student learning and educational attainment. This report incorporates an ecological understanding of child development to signify how individuals, families, schools, and communities interact through the education process and contribute in different ways to children's learning outcomes. It builds on earlier research (and particularly the influential work of Epstein [1987, 1996]), to present a conceptual model that reflects the broad contexts in which parental engagement takes place and demonstrates the complex inter-relationships that shape parental engagement practices and student learning outcomes.

Derived from the findings of a large study by the Harvard Family Research Project, the model depicted in Figure 1 has been adapted slightly to broaden the context in which parental engagement takes place, and incorporate an ecological understanding of child development. Factors that are most 'malleable' are highlighted in bold: that is, family practices/behaviours, student factors, and the school community.

### Common principles for effective parental engagement

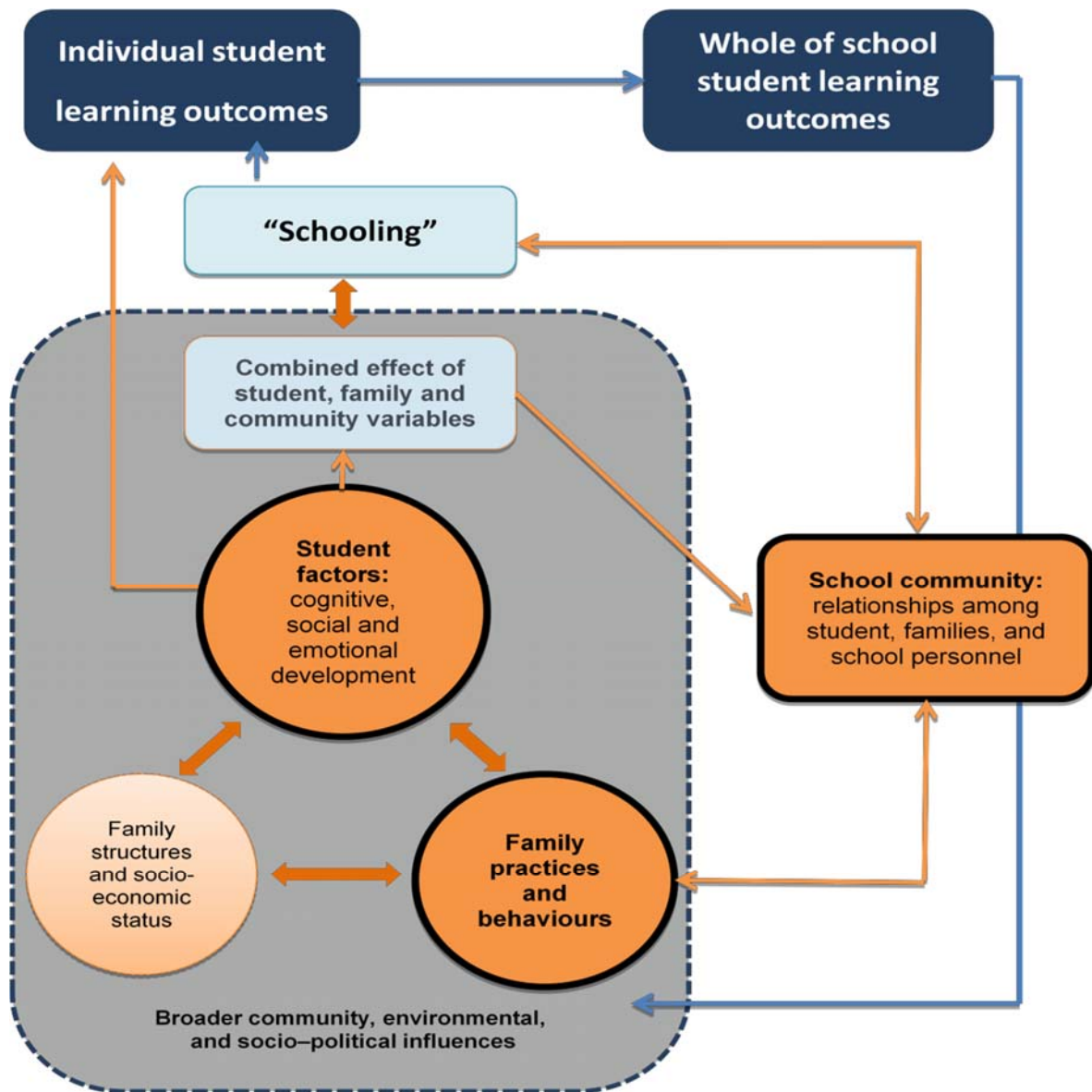
Notwithstanding the range of often contradictory literature on the role of parents in learning, there are certain principles which lie at the heart of effective parental engagement. Although they are known by different terms and are discussed in different ways, a number of ideas are repeated and reinforced throughout the literature: academic socialisation, parental role construction, and parenting style.

#### Academic socialisation

The term *academic socialisation* describes certain kinds of parental behaviours which have a demonstrably positive impact on learning and academic outcomes. Academic socialisation involves:

- communicating with children about parental expectations for education and about the value and enjoyment of learning,
- discussing learning strategies with children,
- linking school work to current events and other topics,
- fostering educational aspirations and making preparations and plans for the future,
- providing a stimulating home learning environment, and making learning enjoyable and rewarding, and
- focusing on activities which are directed at building students' decision-making and problem solving skills and affirming their growing autonomy, independence, and academic abilities.

Figure 1: A model for effecting change through parental engagement



Adapted from Harvard Family Research Project

Academic socialisation provides a way of considering parental involvement that focuses on the needs of the child, including independence and autonomous decision-making. It is considered especially relevant for high school students as it is not dependent on parents sustaining relationships with every teacher. Rather, it is intended to develop abilities in students over time that allow them to independently assess their goals, anticipate the results and consequences of their own actions, and learn from their successes and failures.

### **Parental role construction**

The extent to which parents are engaged and the likelihood of that engagement being sustained over time is dependent upon how they perceive themselves as actors in their children's education. *Parental role construction* therefore plays a decisive part in the likelihood of a parent becoming engaged in education. Whether parents decide to take part in their children's education autonomously, or whether they become engaged as a result of invitations (actual or perceived) from schools, can in turn influence the nature and quality of their engagement.

Some researchers believe that parental role construction is the single most crucial factor in decisions by parents to become engaged. They argue that the way parents perceive their role in education is generally determined by the following factors:

- beliefs about appropriate and desirable child outcomes,
- beliefs about who is responsible for these outcomes,
- perceptions of what important group members (e.g. family, teachers, other parents) expect from them as parents, and
- parental behaviours related to those beliefs and expectations.

Parental role construction is important not just because it affects parents' decisions about how and whether to become engaged, but also because role construction is intimately linked to academic achievement. Parental aspirations and expectations for their children's education have a strong relationship to academic outcomes. In turn, a parent's sense of efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children is central to whether and how they become involved with their children's schooling. The lowest likelihood of engagement occurs when parental role construction is weak – when parents do not believe they should be involved in their child's education and have a low sense of efficacy.

### **Parenting style**

There is also evidence that *parenting style* which is supportive of the child and encourages conversation and exchange between the parent and child is more conducive to emotional wellbeing during the schooling years. A supportive parenting style allows for the setting of limits and rules while making transparent the reasons behind decisions, thereby acknowledging the autonomy and self-responsibility of the child. Conversely, a style which is emotionally distant yet which requires children to obtain high levels of academic achievement can lead to low levels of self-esteem in children, which can have a flow- through negative impact on academic achievement.

### **Parental engagement and child wellbeing**

As already noted, much of the literature on parental engagement assesses the links between engagement and academic achievement. There is a risk however, that parents may place excessive pressure on students to academically excel. This may be detrimental to children's wellbeing, as there is increasing recognition that a lack of social and emotional competence can adversely affect student wellbeing and overall academic achievement.

There is evidence that the integration of social and emotional programs into the broader school curriculum can have a positive effect on academic achievement and wellbeing.

While the parenting behaviours referred to as academic socialisation have been shown to lead to better academic outcomes, any parental engagement strategy should be tempered by an appreciation of the need to foster the development of students' wellbeing more broadly.

The purpose of parental engagement in schooling contexts should therefore be to enhance *student wellbeing* as well as promote academic achievement.

### Lessons for policy and practice

Families, schools and communities contribute in unique and complementary ways to a child's learning process. Any approach to parental engagement must recognise that there are multiple actors – parents, teachers, schools, the wider community, and peers – which interact in a child's learning and formal education. Successful parental engagement strategies and initiatives reflect an awareness of this interdependence and the wider context in which child development occurs.

The evidence reviewed in this report suggests interventions have the greatest impact when they are focused on linking behaviours of families, teachers and students to learning and learning outcomes, when there is a clear understanding of the roles of parents and teachers in learning, when family behaviours are conducive to learning, and when there are consistent, positive relations between the school and parents.

The evidence also indicates that successful parental engagement strategies focus on local needs and contexts, incorporate a variety of communication channels, and are flexible in how engagement is defined – so long as the core principles of academic socialisation, appropriate parental role construction, and positive parenting style are used as the basis for action.

Parental engagement initiatives, whether implemented at a home, school or community level, require a clear focus on student learning, development and wellbeing. They also require leadership and adequate resources at the school level. Engagement strategies are more likely to be successful when teachers know how to communicate effectively with parents, where dedicated school staff work with parents, and where there is strong support from the principal for this work. While dedicated resources are often needed, the level of resourcing for each school is likely to vary with community need and with the engagement strategies chosen.

Effective approaches differ across age groups and need to adjust to the learning trajectories of individual children. Parental involvement on school grounds appears to be suitable for children at primary school to enhance social and emotional adjustment, while it may have little impact on high school students. Parental engagement, on the other hand, appears to have benefits across all age groups.

For parents to be effectively engaged in learning, schools need to ensure there are trusting relationships between teachers and parents. Building trust can be difficult, and may require additional effort and creativity on the part of teachers and schools.

This is particularly the case for parents in traditionally 'hard to reach' or 'under-served' groups, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Finally, successful parental engagement is continuous. Children are born to learn, and parental engagement needs to start from infancy and be maintained throughout childhood and well into teenage years and early adulthood. Though the nature of parental participation may change, the level of

commitment from parents needs to remain the same. For parents to understand and appreciate their continuing role, parents, schools and indeed the general community need to build a mutual understanding of positive parental engagement and progress strategies to create and sustain this. Through this mutual understanding and commitment, children's wellbeing will be enhanced, and they will have a much greater chance of living a life that they value, where their full capacities and aspirations are fulfilled.

For the benefits of parental engagement to be realised, it is critical that efforts are guided by the best available evidence. This report synthesises key messages from current research in practical terms that can be used by parents, teachers, schools and government to guide parental engagement strategies. Translating this best evidence in policy, practices and programs is the greater challenge, and will require resourcing and commitment by all parties.

## 1 Introduction

This report provides a synopsis of the published literature pertaining to parental engagement in the home and school contexts, and seeks to identify those general approaches and contexts that appear to have the greatest influence on children's educational outcomes. It also provides more detailed information on the various settings in which parents can contribute to learning and different types of engagement strategies.

The report does not provide detailed information on the outcomes of particular programs or initiatives. Instead, it considers what kinds of programs and activities have been found to have a demonstrably positive impact on educational outcomes. It incorporates evidence from individual program evaluations, meta-analyses and other empirical studies and provides commentary that has been informed by interviews with academics, policy-makers, practitioners and representatives of parent organisations.

The report is structured as follows:

Section 2: describes the different environments in which children learn, and outlines the evidence relating to the relative influence of home and school on academic achievement.

Section 3: provides a working definition of parental engagement, summarises the evidence on the relationship between parental engagement and student outcomes, and explains the pathways through which parental engagement can lead to improved outcomes.

Section 4: identifies several approaches to effective parental engagement which are supported by a large body of research: academic socialisation and parental role construction. The importance of maintaining a broad understanding of student wellbeing is also discussed.

Section 5: describes the evidence on a range of strategies which have been found to be effective in promoting parental engagement.

### 1.1 Reflections on the evidence relating to parental engagement

The term *parental engagement* is the subject of much discussion and debate by researchers and policy makers, and is often used interchangeably with *parental involvement* and even *parental participation*. Although some sources provide a clear distinction between engagement and other forms of participation, the definitions used and the way these relate to attitudes and behaviour are not consistent.

The lack of definitional clarity in the literature, coupled with application of the term 'parental engagement' to describe a broad range of activities and approaches, means it is difficult to provide a definitive picture of the evidence on the impact of parental engagement, and to measure the impact of specific forms of engagement. Nonetheless, in drawing together the broad literature on parental engagement, the following analysis finds strong evidence to support the positive impact of parental engagement on academic attainment and wellbeing.

### 1.1.1 Academic and non-academic outcomes

Many studies which investigate the association between parental engagement and student outcomes focus on the influence parental engagement has on academic achievement (Jeynes 2005; Hill and Taylor 2004; Hill and Tyson 2009; Avvisati, Besbas, and Guyon 2010). Accordingly, quantitative evidence on the benefits of parental engagement often relies on measures of attainment such as test scores. It should be stressed, however, that this is just one way to consider student outcomes, these being subject to a complex set of influences that cannot always be measured accurately (Kendall et al. 2008; Bakker and Denessen 2007; La Fevre and Shaw 2011).

Beyond academic attainment, education can benefit children through the development of capabilities such as self-regulation, self-confidence, resilience, determination and aspirations for future success (World Bank Group 2011; AIHW 2009). A positive educational experience contributes to a child's social and emotional development, including 'the ability to identify and understand one's feelings, accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others, manage strong emotions and their expression, regulate one's behaviour, develop empathy for others, and establish and sustain relationships' (AIHW 2009, p.60). Together, these characteristics contribute to a child's ability to achieve academically, but they are evidently worthwhile in and of themselves.

Given that education and learning can contribute to a broad range of developmental outcomes, only some of which are associated with academic achievement, it is clear that other measures of impact would provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of parental engagement in education. However, the existing literature on parental engagement has incorporated broader measures only to a limited extent, instead focusing largely on academic outcomes.

### 1.1.2 Evaluation challenges

It is important to note that there are several challenges which affect how policies and programs to promote parental engagement are evaluated:

- *Defining what parental engagement consists of in the context of a given program.* Engagement could be limited to activities that take place in the school (which is relatively straightforward to track), or it could be much broader, incorporating parenting behaviours at home and parents' attitudes towards their child's schooling (which is more difficult to assess).
- *Variation in what schools and other partners do to promote engagement.* Because engagement activity is often based on the needs and preferences of local parents, engagement strategies may vary widely. This means that the impact of different activities cannot necessarily be compared directly and may be highly context-dependent.
- *The multiple and intersecting arenas in which learning and development occurs.* As Epstein and Sheldon observe, 'it is all but impossible to separate the interests and influences of educators, parents, and other educational partners on student achievement, attitudes and behaviours' (2006, p.117). Parental engagement may also be at its most effective when other pre-conditions are in place (e.g. a stable home environment, positive peer relationships). By the same token, parental engagement may not improve learning if such pre-conditions are not met.



- *The inability to ascribe causality.* Because of the many interlinking influences on learning and development, it is difficult to assert that it was one activity and not another that led to better outcomes. Evaluating through experimental or quasi-experimental design – which would provide this kind of evidence – requires additional resources and can be problematic for other reasons.
- *The program context through which activity to promote parental engagement is funded.* Under the Commonwealth-funded National Partnerships, parental engagement appears to be acknowledged as an important policy imperative. Similarly, in the United States the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) supports a wide range of educational programs, including parental engagement. When evaluating such large initiatives as a whole (as is currently taking place) it is difficult to isolate the effects of parental engagement from other activities funded under the program.
- *An indirect link between parental activity and academic outcomes.* While academic outcomes are more easily measured than other indicators of student wellbeing and development, they are not necessarily the best – and are certainly not the only – indicator of effective parental engagement. This issue is explored further below.

### 1.1.3 Other methodological considerations

In Australia and overseas, the majority of parental engagement programs and strategies have been targeted at low-income communities where educational participation and achievement tend to be lower. For this reason, much of the evidence referred to in this report is based on information about programs implemented in low-SES school communities. This does not mean that parental engagement is not important in moderate to high-SES school communities, or that some of the lessons from low-SES experiences cannot be translated to other contexts. Rather, parental and community engagement strategies need to be aligned to the particular needs of each school community as well as the characteristics of individual schools.

A degree of caution is required when considering individual initiatives as many are small in scale, and success is often dependent on local circumstances and personnel (Bakker and Denessen 2007; Mattingly et al. 2002). Methodological problems have also been identified where programs are evaluated over periods of three years or less, with some researchers arguing that such timeframes are too short to detect substantial, long-lasting changes in academic achievement (Clinton, Hattie and Dixon 2007).

A further shortcoming of the existing empirical literature on the impacts of parental engagement is that parents select their own level of engagement rather than (for example) being randomly selected to participate in engagement programs. This means that there are methodological barriers to asserting a direct causal relationship between family involvement and academic achievement (Avvisati, Besbas, and Guyon 2010).

Despite the difficulties in establishing causal relationships between parental engagement and academic achievement, many studies point towards a range of parental practices that contribute to students' motivation for learning and sense of belonging at school.

This report seeks to outline these practices and the principles which underpin them.



## 2 Different learning environments

### 2.1. Where do children learn?

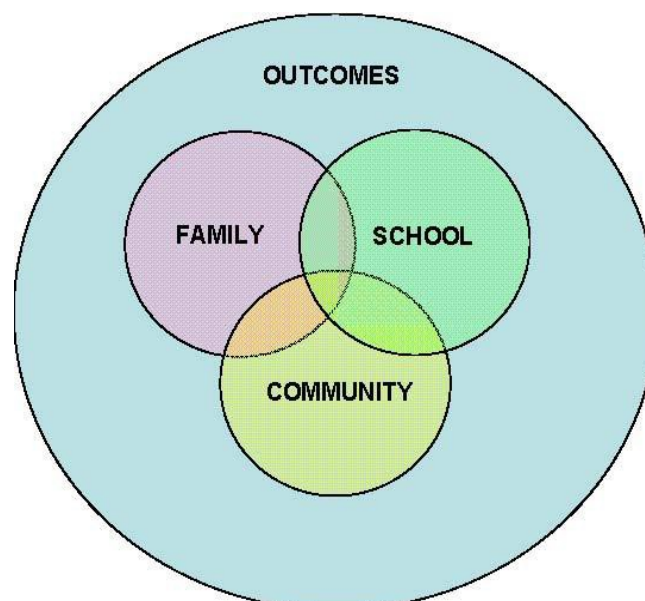
Formal education is one of many ways that children learn and develop. Learning begins well before children enter school, and once children are attending school they continue to learn both inside and outside the classroom. Parents play a critical role in providing learning opportunities at home and in linking what children learn at school with what happens elsewhere. By participating in learning interactions and activities outside the school, parents become important actors in a child's learning.

Because learning is subject to many influences, some researchers make reference to an ecological theory of child development which emphasises multiple interacting systems of influence and dynamic interactions between the child, the education system and wider social contexts over time (Bronfenbrenner 1979; AIHW 2012).

Ecological theory underpins research that shows how parenting practices, the quality of education, and the resources of a community all interact and contribute to the learning outcomes of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Ryan, Fauth, and Brooks-Gunn 2006). From this broader perspective, education is represented as a shared responsibility between families, schools, communities and others, rather than being the exclusive domain of schools.

Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model (Epstein 1987, 1996), detailed in Figure 2, has been highly influential in research and practice on family, school and community partnerships. Her model recognises that students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school and community work together and play collaborative, complementary and supportive roles to support learning and development (Epstein and Sheldon 2006).

**Figure 2: Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model**



Epstein's model has been built on by researchers and practitioners to explain how educators, families and communities can connect to support student learning and success (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Mapp 2002; Muller 2006).

This report continues to build on Epstein's work by:

- synthesising research on the impact of the multiple domains that impact parental engagement and student learning outcomes,
- proposing a model for affecting change through parental engagement (Figure 3, p. 33) that captures the dynamic inter-relationships between the multiple domains, and
- identifying key leverage or intervention points to foster improved parental engagement and positive outcomes for children and young people.

### 2.1.1 The home environment

The home learning environment is formative in a child's social development and is an essential contributing factor to educational outcomes at all stages of the learning trajectory (Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008; Kendall et al. 2008). Parents can create a home environment suitable for learning by, among other things (OECD 2011):

- designating an area to do homework,
- providing access to reading material, and
- assisting with the organisation of homework and studies.

A stimulating home learning environment which consists of a variety of educational materials and positive reinforcement of the value of education by parents is integral to intellectual and social development in children of all ages (Sylva et al. 2004; Henderson and Berla 1994; Sammons et al. 2008). In addition to making learning enjoyable and rewarding, a quality home learning environment contributes to the standards that children set for themselves and their aspirations for education (Jeynes 2005). Home-based involvement also includes activities which do not take place in the home *per se*, such as taking children to events and places that foster academic achievement. These can include museums, libraries, galleries, talks and performances (Hill and Tyson 2009).

Evidence indicates that parental involvement in the form of at-home good parenting has a positive effect on children's achievement (Sheldon and Epstein 2005; Duckworth et al. 2009). Parents can communicate their expectations and educational aspirations by, for example, discussing subject selection and choices, academic aspirations and post-school pathways (Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack 2007). Such communication represents a style of parenting which is supportive of a child's academic progress, places value on learning, and models behaviours appropriate for achievement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 2005).

Importantly, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data indicates that parents do not need to invest a significant amount of time or acquire specialised knowledge in order to assist their children in learning. Instead, improved educational outcomes result from a genuine interest and active engagement from parents (OECD 2011). By simply reading to and talking with their children about

school, films, and books, parents can contribute to children's learning outcomes (OECD 2011). Therefore, the contribution of the home environment to educational outcomes lies not in how parents teach their children specific subjects or content, but how they guide and encourage their children in learning (Bakker and Denessen 2007). This principle is discussed at more length in Section 4.

While the kinds of reading materials and conversations around learning will change as children get older to reflect their stage in the learning trajectory, the importance of parents maintaining a genuine interest in learning and actively engaging with their children's learning remains the same. As Henderson and Mapp (2002, p.30) state, 'the more families support their children's learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education'.

Just as access to educational resources in the home, along with regular conversations between parents and children about learning, are integral to student outcomes (both academic and non-academic), so too is the interaction between the home and the school.

### **2.1.2 The school environment**

The role of parents in the school environment is very different to their role in the home, although the two complement each other. In the school, parents may participate in school activities (such as sporting events), be part of a committee, or attend meetings with their children's teachers (Hill and Taylor 2004; Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwick 2007).

The effect that parental involvement in school has on a child's academic achievement is difficult to determine (Harris and Goodall 2007; Harris and Goodall 2008; Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008; Avvisati, Besbas and Guyon 2010; Bakker and Denessen 2007). Some research suggests that a parent's involvement in school activities is positively associated with students' social and emotional adjustment (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Westmoreland et.al 2009), but there is limited evidence that attending school-based activities that are not directly connected to learning has an impact on student academic outcomes.

Parents' involvement in school-based activities is most likely to have a positive influence in the early years of schooling when children require additional support to adjust to a new learning environment and to develop a sense of belonging (Henderson and Mapp 2002). As children get older, parental involvement in school-based activities may affect student outcomes indirectly through improved attendance and behaviour (Kendal et al. 2008).

Effective parental engagement practices change as children grow and develop. The early years of education provide opportunities for parents to learn about effective ways to converse with their children about learning and become comfortable talking with teachers and other staff about their children's academic and social development. For this reason, it is important that, from the beginning, parents feel comfortable participating in activities on school grounds, and consider the school as a partner in their children's learning.

### **2.1.3 Interactions between home and school**

Gains in learning are most prominent when parents and school staff work together to facilitate a supportive learning environment in both the home and the school. The combined effect of parental support in the home, a quality home learning environment, a positive relationship between parents and teachers, and a

quality learning environment at school has been found to make a positive contribution to children's academic achievement throughout the schooling years (Gutman and Midgley 2000, in Henderson and Mapp 2002; Epstein and Sheldon 2006). Parental involvement within the school can act as a precursor to effective practices at home, and parents are more able to assist their children if they are kept informed about how they are doing in school and the best ways to encourage and motivate them to learn (Desforges and Abouchar 2003; Kellaghan et.al. in Henderson and Berla 1994).

While the home learning environment remains critical to a child's education, dialogue between parents and school needs to occur to keep parents informed about curricula, courses, school rules, and assessments. Building this kind of communication, parents and teachers can then work together to support the child in his or her education (Lee and Bowen 2006). This dialogue can lead to conversations about optimal home learning environments that in turn benefit a child's academic pursuits.

#### **2.1.4 Neighbourhoods and communities**

A number of studies indicate that the neighbourhood in which a child or young person lives has an effect on wellbeing and educational outcomes (Catsambis and Beveridge 2001; Johnson 2011; Wrigley 2011).

The literature suggests that neighbourhoods and communities can influence students both directly and indirectly. Location can directly affect education outcomes through school culture, teaching practices, student confidence and motivation, and school resources (Ainley 2003 in Erebus International 2005). Location can influence educational outcomes indirectly through the presence or absence of positive role models interacting with children and in the amount of educationally stimulating activities available to take part in (Black 2008). In low income areas, a whole-of-community approach may be desirable or required for sustained improvement in educational outcomes.

## **2.2 The relative influence of home and school**

### **2.2.1 Defining home and school**

There is no doubt that the home environment and parent-child interactions have an enormous influence on child development from a very early age and into adulthood. When trying to ascertain the influence of parental engagement on learning, however, there is a danger of conflating two very different ways of comparing home and school:

1. The relative influence on learning of (a) home, and (b) school.
2. The relative influence on learning of (a) parental activities that take place in the home, and (b) parental activities that take place in the school.

The first (broader) distinction between home and school is sometimes used to argue for a greater or lesser focus from policy-makers on either schools or parents in isolation. Because the education process relies on different learning environments which interact and reinforce each other, it is in fact very difficult to isolate home from school in this way. Various authors have discussed the problems associated with properly assessing the impact of engagement activities on educational attainment.

Research and exemplary practice reveal that it is all but impossible to separate the interests and influences of educators, parents, and other educational partners on student achievement, attitudes and behaviours. Although it is, admittedly, harder to study more than one setting at a time, it is critical for researchers to

recognise the simultaneous and cumulative effects of home, school and community on student development (Epstein and Sheldon 2006).

If we are seeking to quantify the influence of parental engagement on learning, it is the second (narrower) distinction between home and school that is pertinent. Rather than addressing the relative influence of the 'home' versus the 'school' on child outcomes, it is important to focus instead on what can confidently be said about the relative influence of parental engagement in the home and school environments. Although there is a great deal of research about the importance of parental engagement of various kinds, there is no definitive measure of the relative importance of home- and school-based engagement.

There are a range of definitional issues which make assessing the relative difference between the influence of home- and school-based involvement highly problematic. For research purposes, 'parental involvement' might be limited to activities that take place in the school, or it could be much broader, incorporating parenting behaviours at home and parents' attitudes towards their child's schooling. In addition, a variety of research methods have been used to assess levels of parental involvement/engagement, and researchers have used different indicators to assess the nature and impact of this. These issues have led to disagreement in the literature about the degree to which a direct causal relationship between parental engagement and children's academic outcomes can be identified (Bakker and Denesson 2007).

Given the many contributors to student achievement, complex causal relationships and definitional inconsistencies in the literature, it is difficult – and perhaps impossible – to precisely quantify the relative influence of parental involvement/engagement in the home and school environments on student learning and academic achievement.

There is however a compelling body of evidence about what kinds of parental involvement/engagement can have the greatest influence on learning outcomes.

There is also compelling evidence supporting the assertion that parents' attitudes, behaviours, and actions in relation to their children's education have a substantial impact on student learning and educational attainment.

### 2.2.2 Evidence on the relative contribution of home and school

A key objective for this research is to examine the available evidence on the relative influence of home and school on learning outcomes. Specifically, it has been suggested that the relative influence of the home on student achievement is 60 to 80 per cent, while the school accounts for 20 to 40 per cent.

A likely source for this assertion is the field of study known as School Effectiveness Research (SER) which examines the contribution that schools make to student achievement and the processes through which these contributions occur. SER would appear to be where the notion of an 80/20 breakdown in the relative influence of home and school originated.

SER originally arose in response to the landmark Coleman Report (1966) in the United States and the Plowden Report (1967) in the United Kingdom, both of which essentially concluded that schools make little difference to student outcomes. The Coleman Report (*Equality of Educational Opportunity Study*) analysed data from 4,000 schools and found that between 5 and 35 per cent of variance in individual achievement was attributable to 'between-school' factors (e.g. facilities, curriculum, overall quality of teachers) once the socio-economic background of students was taken into account. This led the study's authors to assert that 'differences between schools account for only a small fraction of differences in pupil

achievement' (Coleman et al. 1966, p. 22). Similarly, the Plowden report (*Children and Their Primary Schools*) concluded that 'differences between parents will explain more of the variation in children than differences between schools', with parental attitudes accounting for 58 per cent of variation in achievement (Plowden Committee (1967) quoted in Teddlie et al. 2000, p. 79).

Subsequently, many studies have confirmed the findings of the Coleman and Plowden studies that family background and characteristics are more important than schools in determining academic outcomes. Because of the wide variety of statistical methods employed, different studies arrive at different estimates of the magnitude of 'school effects', but these tend to range between 8 and 15 per cent (Teddlie et al. 2000, p. 77).

There are important reasons why simply asserting that the school accounts for 20 to 40 per cent (or 8 to 15 per cent) of the variation in achievement does not imply that 'home' accounts for the remaining 40 to 60 per cent (or 85 to 92 per cent).

Some SER studies (including the landmark Coleman and Plowden reports) examined factors at the whole-of-school level (such as social problems or levels of cohesion), while other studies have concentrated on the factors within the school (such as the quality of individual teachers or teaching styles). These different kinds of studies employ different units of analysis and so the definition of 'school' is not consistent.

For instance, Australian research has shown that the magnitude of 'school effects' varies widely according to the unit of analysis adopted. A longitudinal study by Hill and Rowe (1996) explored the variance between student achievement at the level of the school, the classroom and grade cohorts and found substantially different results (between 0 to 18 per cent). Hill and Rowe explain that 'class effects are very large and ... the unique effect of schools over and above that due to within-school class differences are relatively small. This does not mean that schools do not make a difference, but that they do so mainly at the level of the class' (quoted in Teddlie et al. 2000, p.90).

In addition, factors beyond the school (whatever variability remains after the 8 to 15 per cent which can be influenced by the school) do not necessarily correspond with 'home'. 'Non-school' factors could include fixed variables such as genetic predisposition, family background, social status and location, as well as factors amenable to change such as the level of parental engagement in learning and material resources available to support learning. 'Non-school' factors can even include elements within the school that are not manifest at the whole-of-school level. As Coe and Fitz-Gibbon (1998, p. 424) explain, 'to assume that we can interpret such a variable – defined in terms of what it is not – would be unwise.'

Importantly, there are several strands of School Effectiveness Research, each of which has a slightly different focus:

- Research which compares the relative contribution made by social variables (such as SES background and parental education) and school variables to academic outcomes.
- Research which disregards social variables, and instead concentrates on which variables within the school make the biggest relative contribution to academic outcomes.
- Research examining the processes that lead to or are associated with better academic outcomes.
- Research on the processes that can be used to improve poorly-performing schools (Reynolds et al. 2000).

There is debate about the merits and pitfalls of these various approaches (see for example Coe and Fitz-Gibbon 1998; Teddlie and Reynolds 2010). Some have dismissed SER as 'reform posing as science' (Teddlie

et al. 2000, p. 27) because it has been used to justify various kinds of policy interventions, while others have argued that SER warrants serious policy attention (Teddlie and Reynolds 2010). According to Reynolds et al. (2000, p. 21), ‘much of the [Australian] research in the area of school effectiveness has been driven by the need for governments to justify some of the changes being made towards relating education more closely to the needs of the Australian economy’. SER recently figured prominently in a paper commissioned (Gonski) Review of Funding for Schooling Panel (NOUS Group 2011).

Despite disagreements among academics, it is clear from the body of literature on school effectiveness that academic outcomes have a strong association with family background. If family background is synonymous with ‘home’ then it could be asserted that the influence of ‘home’ is greater than that of ‘school’. However, such a conceptualisation does not adequately capture those aspects of the home environment which can be influenced through policy intervention including, for example, the degree of engagement that parents have with their children’s learning.

Some researchers have attempted to identify and compare those aspects of the home and school environments that have the greatest impact on academic outcomes. Hattie (2009) synthesised 800 meta-analyses (based on over 50,000 studies) that reviewed the relationship between academic achievement and a wide variety of contributing factors. Hattie grouped a broad range of specific indicators into six domains – student, home, school, teacher, curricula and teaching approach – and identified the extent to which each indicator and each domain impacted on student achievement in order to determine the most significant influences on achievement and the most effective interventions. Hattie’s study makes clear both the extraordinary array of influences on student learning and academic attainment and the complexity of disaggregating these.

Table 1 presents the average effect size for each domain. These effect sizes are the average of a range of indicators and, as with all meta-analyses, are drawn from a number of studies using diverse methodologies and sample sizes, and conducted in various contexts and countries. The results for some indicators are based on numerous studies and research with vast numbers of students, while other indicators have been less extensively researched and are therefore less robust.

At first glance, Hattie’s analysis suggests that teaching, curricula and teaching approaches have the strongest effects on student achievement, and that the impact of the home environment is rather more modest. However, the aspects of the ‘home’ domain that relate most directly to parental engagement, as it is conceptualised in this report, are ‘home environment’ and ‘parental involvement’. Hattie’s characterisation of ‘home environment’ includes socio-psychological factors, intellectual stimulation in the home, and parenting approaches like responsiveness, restriction, punishment, play materials, involvement and variety (Hattie 2009, p. 67), while ‘parental involvement’ refers to active involvement in learning activities and the communication of high aspirations (i.e. ‘academic socialisation’).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Average effect for each of the major contributors to learning**



| Domain  | Average Effect Size <sup>2</sup> |
|---|----------------------------------|
| <b>Student</b><br><i>Including background, attitudes and dispositions, physical influences and preschool experiences.</i>   | 0.40                             |
| <b>Home</b><br><i>Including socioeconomic status, welfare reciprocity, family structure, home environment, television, parental involvement, home visiting.</i>   | 0.31                             |
| <b>School</b><br><i>Including attributes of schools, types of school, school composition, classroom composition, curricula for gifted students and classroom influences.</i>  | 0.23                             |
| <b>Teacher</b><br><i>Including teacher effects, teacher training, microteaching, teacher subject matter knowledge, quality of teaching, teacher-student relationships, professional developments, expectations, not labelling students and teacher clarity.</i>   | 0.49                             |
| <b>Curricula</b><br><i>Including reading, mathematics and science and other curricula programs.</i>   | 0.45                             |
| <b>Teaching approach</b><br><i>Including teaching strategies emphasising: learning intentions, success criteria, feedback, student perspectives in learning, and student meta-cognitive/self-regulated learning; and implementation approaches emphasising: teaching strategies, school-wide teaching strategies, technology, and out of school learning.</i> | 0.42                             |

Hattie finds a 0.57 effect size for home environment and a 0.51 effect size for parental involvement in learning, as well as a 0.57 effect size for socio-economic status. The lower average effect for 'home' is a product of the negative effects on achievement of television watching (-0.18) and of welfare reciprocity (-0.12), suggesting that 'home' factors do in fact have an impact at least comparable to teaching and the quality and efficacy of curricula.

In addition, Hattie's model does not capture relationships between indicators, and parental engagement arguably underpins or influences a range of other indicators Hattie identified as significant. For instance, student factors such as prior achievement (0.67), reducing anxiety (0.40), concentration, persistence and engagement (0.48) and preschool programs (0.47) are likely to be strongly influenced by parental engagement.

<sup>1</sup> In summarising the evidence on the contribution of the *home*, Hattie notes that 'parental expectations are far more powerful than many of the structural factors of the home ... it is not so much the structure of the family, but rather the beliefs and expectations of the adults in the home that contributes most to achievement' (p.71).

<sup>2</sup> An effect size of *d* 1.0 is equivalent to an increase in academic outcomes of one standard deviation. Hattie (2009) regards an effect size of 0.4 as a benchmark because it indicates an improvement in outcomes that is higher than average.



The most significant teaching attributes and approaches included the provision of feedback (0.73), providing formative evaluation (0.90), teaching meta-cognitive strategies (0.69) and positive teacher-student relationships (0.72). These factors are also potentially amenable to influence through parental engagement, especially if parents are able to reinforce messages and approaches communicated in the classroom or contribute to the development of positive student-teacher relationships.

Hattie's analysis identifies the importance of multiple domains and influences on student achievement, and it is clear that there are strong connections and complex interrelationships between the domains. Teacher quality, curricula and teaching approach are prominent components of school reform strategies and educational policy in Australia; there has been less focus on parental engagement than the evidence would suggest is necessary.

### 3 The role of parents in learning

#### 3.1 What is parental engagement?

The term *parental engagement* is the subject of much discussion and debate by researchers and policy makers, and is often used interchangeably with *parental involvement* and even *parental participation* (Weiss et.al 2009; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Although some sources provide a clear distinction between engagement and other forms of involvement, the definitions used and the way these relate to attitudes and behaviour are not consistent. This means that it is not possible to begin with a definition of parental engagement that is universally accepted and unambiguous. Nevertheless, it is important to outline a working definition of parental engagement that corresponds to what the evidence suggests has a beneficial impact on children's learning outcomes. This working definition can be further developed, in collaboration with stakeholders, at a later stage.

Considered broadly, *parental engagement* involves partnerships between families, schools and communities, raising parental awareness about the benefits of becoming engaged in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so (Muller 2009).

The term *parental involvement*, in contrast, is used by some to refer only to those activities that take place in the school such as volunteering, meeting with teachers and other school personnel, attending school events, and parent teacher conferences (Hill and Taylor 2004). The term *engagement* is used throughout this report to encapsulate a broader conception of the role of parents in learning. In this report, the term *parent* refers to all types of parental figures, including carers.

While the current evidence supports the notion that parental engagement can and does affect student academic attainment, there is an important difference between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning. It is the latter that has been shown to have the greatest positive impacts (Harris and Goodall 2007). While involving parents in school activities may have an important community and social function, it is the engagement of parents in learning in the home that brings about positive changes in children's academic attainment.

Importantly, promoting engagement in the home often requires communication between teachers and parents that may take place in the school environment and which then fosters positive changes at home and elsewhere. Accordingly, it is not necessarily meaningful to make a clear distinction between home- and school-based engagement, particularly where the two are mutually reinforcing.

Broadly conceived, parental engagement promotes shared responsibility for education among parents and teachers, where the learning process transcends the school environment and the formal curriculum.

As explained in Section 4, parents and schools can work together to create the optimal learning conditions for children and young people by having high expectations, having conversations about educational and occupational aspirations, discussing the different roles of parents, teachers and students, and developing parents' understanding of home reading norms and study habits (Weiss et.al 2010; Redding et al. 2004).

### 3.2 What does parental engagement consist of?

Epstein’s framework of six types of involvement provides a structure for parental partnership activities in schools that receive funding under the US Government’s *No Child Left Behind* legislation (US Department of Education 2005). Table 2 below describes each type of involvement and provides examples of the kinds of activities associated with these (adapted from National Network of Partnership Schools, 2011).

**Table 2: Epstein’s six types of involvement<sup>3</sup>**

| Involvement Type  | Examples of Actions   |
|---|---|
| <p><i>1. Parenting</i></p> <p>Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops on parenting and child development at each age and grade level</li> <li>• Parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g. family literacy, university or training programs)</li> <li>• Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and parenting, including food co-ops, parent-to-parent groups</li> <li>• Home visiting programs or neighbourhood meetings to help families understand schools and help schools understand families</li> </ul> |
| <p><i>2. Communication</i></p> <p>Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language translators to assist families as needed</li> <li>• Regular schedule of useful notices, e-mails, phone calls, and other communications</li> <li>• Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, assessments, and transitions</li> <li>• Clear information about choosing schools and selecting courses, programs, and activities within schools</li> </ul>   |
| <p><i>3. Volunteering</i></p> <p>Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent room or family centre for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families</li> <li>• Annual survey to identify interests, talents, and availability of volunteers</li> <li>• Encourage all families to attend as daytime and evening audiences for students’ performances</li> </ul>   |
| <p><i>4. Learning at home</i></p> <p>Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information for families on required skills in all subjects at each grade</li> <li>• Information on how to assist students with skills that they need to improve</li> <li>• Summer learning modules or activities</li> <li>• Family participation in helping students set academic goals each year and plan for higher education or work</li> </ul>  |

<sup>3</sup> Although Epstein uses the term ‘involvement’, her model incorporates certain activities this report would characterise as ‘engagement’.

| Involvement Type   | Examples of Actions   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>5. Decision-making</b><br/>Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through school councils, committees and parent organisations.</p>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active parent organisations, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation</li> <li>• Networks to link all families with parent representatives</li> <li>• Independent advocacy groups to advocate for school reform and improvements</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>6. Collaborating with the community</b><br/>Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information for students and families on health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs/services in the community</li> <li>• Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents</li> <li>• School-business partnerships</li> <li>• 'One-stop' shopping for family services through school partnerships with counselling, health, recreation, job training, and other agencies</li> </ul> |

Epstein's six types of involvement are similar to the seven key dimensions that form the basis of Australia's Family-School Partnerships Framework (DEEWR 2008) as outlined below in Table 3.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 3: Key dimensions of family-school partnerships**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>A. Communicating</b></p>                             | <p>This key dimension emphasises that effective communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is active, personal, frequent, culturally appropriate and multi-dimensional; is open to families' needs and attitudes</li> <li>• is a two-way exchange between families and schools that involves not only an exchange of information, but also opportunities for schools and families to learn from each other</li> <li>• makes clear that families are genuine partners and can help solve big problems.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>B. Connecting learning at home and at school</b></p> | <p>This key dimension emphasises families and schools understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the overlap between the home and school environments</li> <li>• the connection between successful partnerships and children's learning, including the importance of high expectations from both teachers and parents to children's success at school</li> <li>• the importance of families and schools working together to create positive attitudes to learning, and of parents working with teachers in the educational decision-making process for their children</li> <li>• the benefits of schools being venues and agents to parental self-growth, learning and the development of new skills.</li> </ul> |

<sup>4</sup> This framework was prepared collaboratively by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), the Australian Parents Council (APC), the Australian Government, and other key stakeholders including State and territory government and non-government school authorities, and school principals' associations.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>C. Building community and identity</b>    | <p>This key dimension emphasises:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• activities that improve the quality of life in a community while honouring the culture, traditions, values and relationships in that community</li> <li>• that the work of schools includes aspects of the social, emotional, moral and spiritual development of young people</li> <li>• that schools can act as a focal point for communities to come together and engage in capacity building.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>D. Recognising the role of the family</b> | <p>This key dimension emphasises that as primary educators of their children, parents and families have a lasting influence on their children's attitudes and achievements at school. They can encourage their children's learning in and out of school and are also in a position to support school goals, directions and ethos. Parents look to schools to provide secure and caring environments for their children.</p>  |
| <b>E. Consultative decision-making</b>       | <p>This key dimension emphasises that parents are entitled to be consulted and to participate in decisions concerning their children. An inclusive approach to school decision-making and parental involvement/engagement creates a shared responsibility among parents, community members, teachers and school leaders.</p>   |
| <b>F. Collaborating beyond the school</b>    | <p>This key dimension emphasises identifying, locating and integrating community resources which can strengthen and support schools, students and their families, and opportunities for schools, students and families to assist the community in return.</p>  |
| <b>G. Participating</b>                      | <p>This key dimension emphasises that families' time, energy and expertise can support learning and school programs in multiple ways and that all contributions are valuable. This may involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• working with students on learning activities in classrooms</li> <li>• participating in other school activities outside the classroom</li> <li>• participating in activities outside the school itself</li> <li>• supporting and valuing teachers</li> <li>• ensuring that parental involvement/engagement is a recognised topic of staff meetings, professional development and in the induction of new staff.</li> </ul> |

### 3.3 What can parental engagement achieve?

#### 3.3.1 Cognitive abilities and academic achievement

International research (Pushor 2007; Harris and Goodall 2007; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) demonstrates that parental engagement (of various kinds) has a positive impact on several indicators of student achievement, including:

- higher grades and test scores,
- increased enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes,
- higher successful completion of classes,
- lower drop-out rates,

- higher graduation rates, and
- greater likelihood of commencing postsecondary education.

### 3.3.2 Economic impact of parental engagement

Various studies have shed light on which kinds of parental engagement are most important. In one of the very few studies which have used economic modelling to examine the impact of parental engagement, Houtenville and Conway (2008) analysed data on more than 10,000 eighth-grade students across the United States of America. They found that *dinnertime engagement* (discussing activities or events of particular interest to the child and things the child has studied in class) has a greater effect on achievement than *school-related involvement* (attending school meetings and volunteering at the school). This finding reinforces the importance of utilising a broad definition of parental engagement.

The same study also found that *parental effort* (the combination of all kinds of engagement) has a large effect on student achievement compared with *school resources* (e.g. per pupil spending on teaching). The magnitude of this effect was equivalent to more than \$1,000 in per-pupil spending per annum, and improved academic outcomes to levels equivalent to those of students whose parents had received an additional four to six years of education.

Another study found that schools with strong family engagement were four times more likely to improve student reading over time, and ten times more likely to improve student learning gains in mathematics (Bryk et al. 2010).

### 3.3.2 Motivation for learning

A quality home environment and parental support can contribute towards a student's motivation for academic achievement and learning, which can in turn increase interest in and satisfaction at school (Mansour and Martin 2009).

Duckworth et al. (2009), for instance, found that children aged 9-13 whose homes offered a more stimulating learning environment (measured at age 8) had a higher intrinsic motivation for academic studies. Others have found that family practices, parenting styles, and parents' personal self efficacy<sup>5</sup> for helping a child to learn all contribute to motivation for learning (Gonida and Urda 2007; Duckworth et al. 2009; Walker and Berthelsen 2010; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 2005).

According to Gonida and Urda (2007), school students can be classified into one of five categories of perceived parental influence:

- desire to please family,
- felt obligation to repay family by achieving academically,
- perceptions of strong family support for academic achievement,
- desire to avoid emulating negative family role models, and
- perceptions that family exert little or no influence on academic motivation and performance.

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<sup>5</sup> Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (2005, p.107) refer to parental sense of efficacy for helping a child succeed at school as being 'a belief that personal actions will help the child learn'.

The different kinds of motivation, including both intrinsic (i.e. learning for its own sake) and extrinsic (e.g. relating to parental influence) suggest that strategies to enhance motivation need to differ from one family to another and even within families.

### 3.3.3 Social and behavioural outcomes

Current best evidence indicates that student 'motivational, cognitive, social and behavioural attributes' can be influenced by the actions of parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005, p.106). Importantly, the positive impact that parental engagement can confer on students, both academically and more broadly, remains even after adjusting for differences in socio-economic and cultural background.

Beyond educational achievement, parental engagement is associated with various indicators of student development. These include:

- more regular school attendance,
- better social skills,
- improved behaviour,
- better adaptation to school,
- increased social capital,
- a greater sense of personal competence and self-efficacy<sup>6</sup> for learning,
- greater engagement in school work, and
- a stronger belief in the importance of education (Pushor 2007).

Evidence shows that parental engagement can contribute towards social development as well as academic achievement as children progress from early childhood through the high school years and into higher education (Jeynes 2007).

### 3.3.4 Criticisms of parental engagement/involvement research

Some of the formative work on parental involvement has been criticised as being limited in its ability to capture the needs of families from diverse cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds (Auerbach 2007; Pushor and Ruitenberg 2005). Such criticism suggests that early conceptualisations of parental involvement do not take into consideration the activities which parents initiate outside of the formal school system.

In order to expand the range of activities through which parents can demonstrate positive behaviour, some authors suggest that other behaviours not directly related to schooling should properly be incorporated into the understanding of legitimate parental engagement. These include limiting TV watching time, being home when children return from school, taking them to cultural events, and watching them in sporting and/or cultural activities (Hattie 2011; Bakker and Denessen 2007). Such criticism has been formative in shifting academic discussion about the role of parents in education from one of involvement to one of engagement.

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<sup>6</sup> Self-efficacy for learning refers to a person's beliefs about their capabilities to achieve on academic tasks. Self-efficacy affects motivation for learning through goal creation, self-monitoring and self-evaluations of progress (Zimmerman and Kitsantas 2005).

There is also some discussion in the literature on the extent to which parents should participate in their children's education, with some empirical evidence indicating that what constitutes appropriate levels of school-based involvement can become a point of contestation between parents and educators (Macfarlane 2008). Disagreement between educators and parents can stem from conflicting interpretations about the role of parents in their child's education, and misinterpretations of invitations from schools. Both causes of contestation are likely the result of a lack of communication and uncertain relationships between the school and parents (Macfarlane 2008; Pomerantz et al. 2007).

As previously noted, Hattie (2009) found that while 'surveillance' type parental engagement can have a detrimental impact on student outcomes, when parents take an active role in supporting learning there is a positive impact on academic achievement.

Despite debate about exactly what constitutes parental engagement and in what respects it is more and less beneficial, there is little doubt in the literature that parental engagement makes a substantial and positive contribution to student outcomes.

### 3.3.5 How does parental engagement improve student outcomes?

The evidence suggests that parental engagement strategies have the greatest impact when they are focused on linking behaviours of families, teachers and students to learning outcomes, when there is a clear understanding of the roles of parents and teachers in learning, when family behaviours are conducive to learning, and when there are consistent, positive relations between the school and parents. For this reason, it is important to understand what factors might be amenable to change and how these might contribute to improved academic outcomes for students. As explained below, there are several pathways through which parents can contribute.

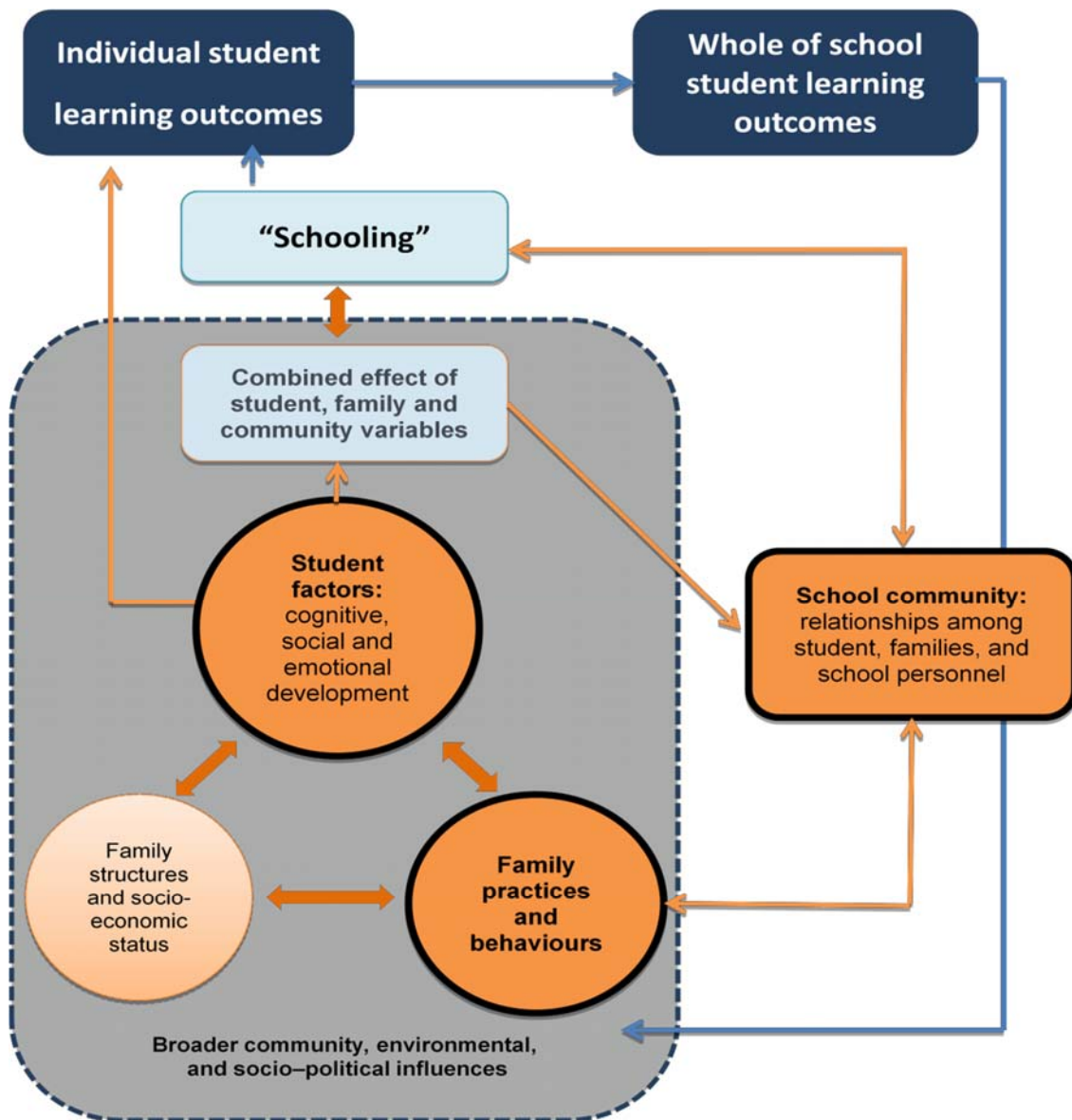
Figure 3 is drawn from a paper which summarises the results of a two-year study across 129 elementary (primary) schools in the United States undertaken as part of the Harvard Family Research Project (Redding et al. 2004). It depicts the student, family, and school variables that can influence student learning outcomes and provides a sound basis for considering how to effect change through parental engagement. Factors that are most amenable to change and intervention are *family practices and behaviours*, *student factors*, and *the school community* (highlighted in bold).

All schools in the study were located in high poverty areas and had implemented comprehensive parent engagement strategies. The strategies included:

- parent participation in decision making at the school;
- alignment of the school's policies and procedures regarding homework and parent-teacher conferences with research-based practice standards;
- explicit discussion of the roles of parents, teachers, and students in relation to compacts, learning standards, and homework policies;
- home reading programs aligned with state standards and in-class instruction;
- parent education focused on home reading and study habits; and
- outreach through home visits, family nights, and a family resource library (Redding et al. 2004).



Figure 3: A model for effecting change through parental engagement



Adapted from Harvard Family Research Project

The model has been adapted to broaden the context in which parental engagement takes place and to incorporate an ecological understanding of child development to signify how individuals, families, schools, communities and the wider socio-economic context interact through the education process and contribute in different ways to children’s learning outcomes.

The model shows that student learning outcomes can be influenced by interventions at various points, including through schooling, the school community, family practices and behaviours, and by supporting the cognitive and social and emotional development of children and young people. It also suggests that

schools can affect home environments in positive ways through intentional and consistent efforts to interact with parents.

As the model identifies, parental engagement in education takes place in a dynamic system and there are multi-directional and mutually reinforcing relationships between individual student factors, family practices and behaviours, the family's socio-economic status, the school community and formal education.

Parental engagement in learning underpins children and young people's cognitive and social and emotional development, shapes family practices and behaviours, and can impact the nature of the school community and the experience of schooling. Parental engagement is, therefore, a highly significant leverage point for enhancing the academic attainment and wellbeing of children and young people.

The research underpinning the model indicates that the following practices exert the greatest influence over learning outcomes:

- schools clearly articulating their expectations of parents and regularly communicating with parents about what children are learning, and suggesting what parents can do to help,
- schools providing parent education with a view to parents helping their children better meet learning standards,
- ongoing conversations between parents and teachers about the role of each in learning, and
- schools providing opportunities for parents to talk with school personnel about their role in their children's education through home visits, family nights, and well-planned parent teacher conferences and school information nights (Redding et al. 2004).

There are several broad approaches which the literature suggests drive effective parental engagement. For example, students need a consistently positive learning environment (both at home and at school) in which they can develop an understanding of the importance of education and its contribution to their goals and ambitions. In addition, it is critical that parents see themselves as active contributors to their children's learning. These approaches are discussed in more detail in Section 4.

Importantly, the nature and impact of parental engagement also changes - and needs to change - over time, both as children grow and develop and as the culture and approach of schools and school communities evolves and parental engagement becomes more established and integrated. Because parental engagement occurs within a dynamic and changing system, an understanding of how engagement practices change and sustain over time is vital.

Different approaches to parental engagement across children's life stages are discussed in Section 5.

## 4 Effective approaches for engaging parents

The body of literature on the role of parents in learning is vast and covers a wide variety of issues and perspectives. Nevertheless, there are certain principles which lie at the heart of effective parental engagement. Although they are known by different terms and are discussed in different ways, two concepts are repeated and reinforced throughout the literature:

- academic socialisation; and
- parental role construction.

This section explains what each of these means in practice, and discusses how they might be applied with the best interests of students in mind.

### 4.1 Academic socialisation

*Academic socialisation* is a term used by Hill and Tyson (2009) to describe certain kinds of parental behaviours which their research shows have the greatest positive impact on learning and academic outcomes. They distinguish these behaviours from other kinds of engagement which they refer to as *school-based involvement* and *home-based involvement*. This report adopts academic socialisation as an overarching term for those behaviours identified in the literature as contributing strongly to educational outcomes. While Hill and Tyson use the term to refer to a set of behaviours linked to their own study, there is a wide range of research that asserts the value of deliberate parental behaviours that seek to increase a child's enjoyment of and belief in the importance of learning – although other authors generally do not use the same terminology.

According to Hill and Tyson, academic socialisation involves communication between parents and children about parental expectations for education and about the value and enjoyment of learning, discussing learning strategies with children, linking school work to current events and other topics, fostering educational aspirations and making preparations and plans for the future.

Academic socialisation can be thought of as part of (but not the same as) home-based involvement. Specifically, it consists of activities which are directed at building children's decision-making and problem solving skills and affirming their growing autonomy, independence, and academic abilities. This is consistent with the goal of promoting learning that takes place both in conjunction with, and independently from, the formal school system (Jennings and Bosch 2011). Table 4 below lists the features of academic socialisation and compares these with other kinds of parental involvement that take place in the home or school.

As children grow older and develop more autonomy, the nature of effective parental engagement strategies changes (Bakker and Denessen 2007). Academic socialisation provides a way of considering parental engagement that focuses on the needs of the child, including the need for independence and autonomous decision-making. This type of parental engagement is considered especially relevant for high school students as it is not dependent on parents sustaining relationships with every teacher (Hill and Tyson 2009). Rather, it is intended to develop abilities in students over time that allow them to independently assess their goals, anticipate the results and consequences of their own actions, and learn from their successes and failures (Hill and Tyson 2009).

**Table 4: Parental behaviours associated with school and home-based involvement and academic socialisation<sup>7</sup>**

|                      | School-Based Involvement  | Home-Based Involvement   | Academic Socialisation   |
|----------------------|---|--|--|
| <i>Communication</i> | Between parents and school personnel  | Between parents and children about school  | Between parents and children about parental expectations for education and about the value and enjoyment of learning |
| <i>Engagement</i>    | Visiting school for school events, participating in school governance and volunteering at school activities | Helping with school work   | Discussing learning strategies with children   |
| <i>Learning</i>      | Creating opportunities for parents to become involved in academic and learning activities in the school     | Creating an environment at home which is conducive to learning                         | Linking school work to current events and other topics   |
| <i>Parenting</i>     | Building relationships between the school and parents   | Taking children to events and places that encourage learning (e.g. museums, libraries) | Fostering educational aspirations and making preparations and plans for the future                                   |

That said, there is no definitive age at which family contributions begin or cease to make critical contributions to student achievement. Rather, the way in which parents communicate to their child the importance of learning over time is critical to a child’s academic success (Hong and Ho 2005). While academic socialisation has the biggest impact on outcomes for early adolescents and high school students, it also has applicability across age groups. The parental behaviours associated with academic socialisation allow parents to contribute to children’s learning at all stages by selecting approaches that are best suited to their learning trajectory. This means that the groundwork for academic socialisation can be laid in the early years of schooling, with the benefits growing as children develop.

## 4.2 Parental role construction

Social and individual roles consist of expectations or beliefs which guide a person’s behaviour within specific contexts, and serve as a basis on which to interpret their own and other’s behaviours (Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler 2005). Parents’ ideas about appropriate roles and behaviours in relation to their children’s education are shaped by multiple interacting beliefs, ideas, and social norms. Family, school and cultural background provide important social context, while belief systems about how children develop also influence parental role construction (Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler 2005).

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995; 1997), parental role construction is the most crucial factor in decisions by parents to become engaged. That is, the extent to which parents are engaged, and the likelihood of that engagement being sustained over time, is dependent upon how parents perceive

<sup>7</sup> Derived from Epstein (2002), Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) and Hill and Tyson (2009).

themselves as participants in their children's education. They argue that the way parents perceive their role in education is generally determined by the following factors:

- beliefs about appropriate and desirable child outcomes;
- beliefs about who is responsible for these outcomes;
- perceptions of what important group members (e.g. family, teachers, other parents) expect from them as parents; and
- parental behaviours related to those beliefs and expectations.

By implication, parents decide to engage 'when they understand that collaboration is part of their role as parents, when they believe they can positively influence their child's education and when they perceive that the child and the school wish them to be involved' (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 2005). A child's personal qualities, such as their temperament and learning style, can also influence parents' decisions about whether or not to become engaged in their education (Deslandes 2001). According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), invitations to involvement come from three sources:

- *The school climate*: a welcoming environment at school indicates that parent involvement is important, valued and expected.
- *Teachers*: specific invitations from teachers indicate and reinforce to parents that they are a valuable contributor to student learning.
- *Students*: invitations from students motivate parents to act according to their children's learning needs.

Parents can decide to take part in their child's education autonomously because they have a high level of self-efficacy and an active role construction, or as a result of invitations from school, teachers or students (Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack 2007; Anderson and Minke 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et.al 2005).

Parental role construction then, plays a decisive part in the likelihood of a parent becoming engaged in education and maintaining engagement in their child's learning and formal school education. Once parents make the decision to engage, they choose specific activities shaped by their perception of their own skills and abilities and other demands on their time and energy (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995, 1997; Deslandes 2001). As noted in Section 2, such activities can vary widely between families from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

#### 4.2.1 Parental self-efficacy

Parental role construction is important not just because it affects parents' decisions about whether and how to become engaged, but also because role construction is intimately linked to academic achievement. Parental aspirations and expectations for their children's education have a strong relationship with academic outcomes (Fan and Chen 2001). In turn, a parent's sense of efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children is central to whether they perceive themselves as contributing meaningfully to their children's education and the level to which they become involved with their children's schooling (Gutman and Akerman 2008).

It is worth noting in this context that if parents have had negative experiences of education in the past, they may feel intimidated by or distanced from the school environment and wider education system.

The lowest likelihood of engagement therefore occurs when parental role construction is weak – that is, when parents don't believe they need to be or should be involved in their child's education and, simultaneously, have a low sense of efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995; 1997). By offering specific recommendations about how to be and remain appropriately engaged in their child's learning, parental beliefs about the importance of their own role in education can change (Pushor 2007). This highlights the link between parents' perceptions of their own roles and the actions that teachers and schools take to engage parents.

#### **4.2.2 Parent/teacher trust**

Trust between parents and teachers is vital if parents are to become appropriately and sufficiently engaged in their children's learning. Accordingly, positive and proactive relationships between parents and teachers are prerequisites for sustained participation in engagement initiatives (Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008). While relationships that are mutually reinforcing, respectful and directed toward improving a child's learning are integral to the success of engagement initiatives, they can be difficult and slow to establish (Kendall et.al 2008). If teachers are able to secure the trust of parents, then parents are more likely to respond to invitations to be involved in school activities outside the school as well as activities that contribute towards their children's learning outcomes. This in turn reinforces parents' own sense of their role as educators (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005).

Consistent dialogue between parents and schools builds trust between the two parties, which is essential in sustaining positive relationships and building partnerships. Once such dialogue is established, it is more likely that schools will consider the values and needs of parents in developing engagement strategies (Smit et.al 2007). If parents feel valued by the school for their role in learning, and there are positive interactions with teachers, they are more likely to become involved in activities that contribute towards their child's education (Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008). Receiving ongoing, respectful, and relevant communications from the teacher contributes to a parent's level of comfort with the school, perception of their child as a learner, and knowledge about specific school programs. Ultimately, quality communications from the school throughout the schooling years can positively contribute to parents' perceptions that they can influence their child's learning at all stages of schooling (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, and Doan Holbein 2005, p.111).

There are some common barriers which need to be overcome in order to foster a sense of confidence in parents in their continuing role as educators across their child's learning trajectory. For example, parents may not believe that their actions make a difference to their child's educational outcomes despite clear evidence that parental expectations alone contribute substantially to such outcomes (Duckworth et.al 2009). Bearing this in mind, it is important for teachers and other 'parent-facing' staff to consistently communicate to parents the importance of daily discussions about what their children are learning and their own expectations and aspirations for them.

#### **4.3 Student wellbeing**

While parental engagement in education can foster positive attitudes to school and learning, excessive parental pressure can have a detrimental effect on student wellbeing (Levin 2005; Hill and Tyson 2009). According to Levin (2005), a parenting style which is emotionally distant yet which requires children to obtain high levels of academic achievement can lead to low levels of self-esteem in children. In contrast, a parenting style which is supportive of the child and encourages conversation and exchange between the parent and child is more conducive to emotional wellbeing during the schooling years (Shucksmith,



Hendry and Glendinning 1995; Milevsky et al. 2007; Levin 2006). Such a style allows for the setting of limits and rules while making transparent the reasons behind decisions, thereby acknowledging the autonomy and self-responsibility of the child (Shucksmith, Hendry and Glendinning 1995).

If the purpose of parental engagement is to enhance student wellbeing rather than solely to promote academic achievement, then the risk of parents placing excessive pressure on students to excel is reduced. While the parenting behaviours referred to as academic socialisation have been shown to lead to better academic outcomes, any parental engagement strategy should be tempered by an appreciation of the need to foster the development of the student more broadly.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare defines social and emotional wellbeing as ‘the way a person thinks and feels about themselves and others. It includes being able to adapt and deal with daily challenges (resilience and coping skills) while leading a fulfilling life’ (2012, p.8). Others have defined wellbeing as ‘a student’s satisfaction at school, their engagement with learning and their social- emotional behaviour’ (Australian Catholic University and Erebus International 2008, p.9). In these interpretations of wellbeing, there is an emphasis on the emotional and behavioural development of children, as well as their ability to cope with adversity (AIHW 2012).

Education has a positive impact upon children’s social and emotional wellbeing and their ability to lead healthy and happy lives (UNDP 2010; AIHW 2012). The Melbourne Declaration, which outlines the current educational goals for young Australians, specifies parental engagement as a key area for action and refers to the ability of education and learning to foster a sense of wellbeing in children. Specifically, Goal 2 of the Melbourne Declaration asserts that through participation in the formal education system, children and young people will become ‘successful learners, confident and creative individuals and informed citizens’ (MCEECDYA 2008, pp.8-9). In addition, the Declaration states that the responsibility of education does not lie solely with the school, but is shared between the school, parents and carers, the students themselves, families, other education and training providers, business, and the wider community (MCEECDYA 2008).

While much of the existing literature has assessed the links between parental engagement and academic achievement, there is a growing focus on the contribution of parental engagement in learning and school education to children’s wellbeing (AIHW 2012; Weare and Gray 2003; UNICEF 2000). For instance, family-school partnerships have been identified as a key factor in a student’s level of wellbeing, and schools are increasingly recognising that a lack of social and emotional competence can adversely affect wellbeing and academic achievement (ACU and Erebus International 2008). Through communication, expectations and quality relationships, parents can influence children’s social and emotional wellbeing in the home. As noted previously, parents can also positively affect a child’s wellbeing in the school through direct involvement in the school setting, most particularly in the early years.

Involving parents in student wellbeing programs can lead to greater outcomes and benefits for children by creating linkages between the home and school settings. Schools can, for example, involve parents in discussions about what is required for children to develop social and emotional competencies. Training in social skills and conflict resolution in the school have been shown to have beneficial impacts on students’ behaviour at home. There are also specific interventions that target students with histories of behavioural and social problems which aim to reduce antisocial behaviour, improve mental health and promote positive emotional and social development. Evaluation of such interventions indicates that family and community involvement is integral to success (Weare and Gray 2003).

## 5 Strategies for promoting parental engagement

This section describes a range of strategies found to be effective in promoting parental engagement. It covers communication approaches, interventions with different target audiences, strategies for parents of students of different ages, and strategies for different cultural groups.

### 5.1 Communication

A key purpose of continual communication and relationship-building is to familiarise parents with the school and the language of education to ensure that they feel comfortable talking to teachers. Schools must be mindful that parents can find the language of education confusing or intimidating, and that this can impede constructive and meaningful communication between parents and teachers at any point in time. It is therefore critical that formal communication mechanisms are 'translated' into language that parents with different educational and cultural backgrounds can understand.

Communication between parents and the school can contribute towards shared learning goals to reinforce children's out-of-school learning (Duckworth et al. 2009). There are multiple ways that schools and teachers can assist parents to support their children's learning at home, for example:

- suggesting specific questions for parents to ask children about their learning,
- assigning interactive homework requiring participation from the family, and
- holding parenting workshops that provide advice to parents on how to build a suitable home learning environment (Duckworth et al. 2009).

Beyond face-to-face meetings, there are a variety of channels that can facilitate communication between schools and parents. Whatever form of communication is used, schools need to employ language that is accessible to parents and ensure that their dialogue does not assume a level of knowledge that parents may not possess. This means jargon from the educational system must be avoided where possible or otherwise appropriately explained.

#### 5.1.1 Parent-teacher meetings

Commonly, meetings between parents and teachers occur when there is a formal parent-teacher discussion about student progress, or when parents are required to meet with the school as a result of behavioural or learning problems. Such problem-focused encounters do not necessarily foster a desire for learning in children or raise their expectations of education (Henderson and Mapp 2002).

For parent-teacher relationships to become more supportive there needs to be more frequent and higher-quality interactions which are focused on connecting parental engagement to learning goals and objectives. Such interactions are beneficial not only for parents, who over time become more attentive to their children's learning, but also for teachers, who become more aware of parents' capacity to support educational activities (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Redding et al. 2004) and outcomes. By ensuring conversations are positive in content and tone, parents can receive clear and consistent information from schools on how to effectively contribute to their children's learning.



### 5.1.2 Internet/new media

Schools can communicate and foster relationships with parents through email, websites, blogs, podcasts and social networking sites (Bouffard 2008; Hohfeld, Ritzhaupt and Barron 2010). The use of these technologies can reduce scheduling barriers that restrict opportunities for face-to-face meetings, convey information to multiple families at once, efficiently share information about school policies and assignments, and provide tips for engaging in learning (Bouffard 2008).

The NSW Department of Education and Training's current resource guide to assist schools in developing relationships with parents outlines the following principles for designing school websites in order to engage parents. Many of these apply to other communication technologies (Lewin and Luckin 2010):

- Promote key messages to parents and carers about the school and its aims.
- Promote home based materials and websites.
- Provide products or resources that parents may work through on their own or with their children.
- Provide interactive workshops and chat rooms for parents.
- Have an area for parents on the site with specific information about how they are able to support their children.
- Link parents to existing resources and publications.
- Link parents with other organisations that have the capacity to provide support.
- Inform parents about special programs that operate within the school (NSW Department of Education and Training 2010).

Online communication also presents challenges. Maintaining websites and email contact requires additional resources, and sustaining effective communication over time may become difficult for some schools. Furthermore, an emphasis on the use of technology can detract from the work of schools to involve and engage parents at the school level (Bouffard 2008). Significantly, not all families have easy access to the Internet and are therefore limited in their ability to participate in online communication with the school (Lewin and Luckin 2010). This is important as in Australia home Internet access is more common in households with higher incomes. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistic (2011), the proportion of households in the highest income quintile with Internet access is 95 per cent, compared with 55 per cent for households in the lowest income quintile. Additionally, the proportion of home Internet access is higher for households in State and Territory capitals (82 per cent) than households in other areas (74 per cent) (ABS 2011).

While technology can contribute to increased parental engagement, communication strategies that utilise new technologies have the most benefit if they take into consideration the diversity of parents' needs, are focused on connecting learning in the home and school environments, and are utilised in such a way as to augment already existing engagement strategies, rather than replace more traditional forms of communication (Lewin and Luckin 2010).

### 5.1.3 Community liaison officers

Schools often communicate with parents through Community or Home-School Liaison Officers who are usually paid staff members with the appropriate skills and commitment to make targeted contact with 'hard to reach' or 'under-served' families. Having dedicated staff to liaise with parents is of particular benefit for families with limited literacy skills or from diverse language and cultural backgrounds

(Denessen et al. 2007). Liaison officers can help families gain knowledge about the school curriculum and what their children will be learning, and can introduce and explain the language of schooling and education (Clinton, Hattie and Dixon 2007). While it is important that all school staff are aware of parental engagement strategies and practices, and are able to confidently interact with parents, the research suggests that skilled liaison officers are critical to forming and maintaining successful relationships with parents.

### **5.1.5 Homework centres**

Another method of communicating with parents is through school-based homework centres, these being specific areas on school grounds where children and parents can access assistance with homework. Homework centres can take pressure off parents to be familiar with the content of school work and can also help to form relationships between parents and teachers, building on initial discussions about school work (Clinton, Hattie and Dixon 2007).

However, some parents do not feel confident entering school grounds or communicating with the school in any form, as has been recognised in the establishment of Parent Information Resource Centres (PIRCs) in America (US Department of Education 2011). An alternative to school-based homework centres, PIRCs are located in the areas in which parents live and provide services that lie outside the traditional offerings of schools (e.g. mental health services, counselling, conferences, workshops about family involvement). In some cases, they also provide domestic assistance for low-income families (e.g. a laundromat). The placement of PIRCs in the community offers an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with parents, the wider community and the school (US Department of Education 2011).

### **5.1.2 Ongoing work to support learning**

Consistent dialogue from the beginning of the school year between parents and the school is critical to developing and sustaining relationships that are conducive to learning outcomes. Lack of appropriate communication by schools to parents is linked to lower levels of parental engagement, particularly in lower-performing schools, and parents are more likely to engage when school personnel value, expect, and invite them to be involved (Westmoreland et.al. 2009).

It is important that teachers and parents discuss learning in a similar language, enabling a consistent dialogue on a child's achievement and progress in the school. If sustained over time, discussions between schools and parents can move from dialogue based on problems and concerns to dialogue focused on solutions and tasks. This change can foster a new awareness of the shared responsibility for education and contribute towards improved student outcomes (Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008).

## **5.2 Intervention focus**

Interventions to promote parental engagement can have different points of focus: parents and families, teachers, whole communities, or school plans and processes. These are discussed in turn below.

### **5.2.1 Parents and families**

Interventions targeting parents and families might take the form of workshops on school grounds which develop the necessary skills in parents to develop their child's learning abilities (Westmoreland et.al 2009; Kendall et.al 2008). Some schools hold parent workshops on weekends to explain and discuss

techniques with parents on how to help with homework and how to effectively discuss subject content with their children. Evaluations of workshops indicate that parents, as a result of their participation, feel more comfortable at the school and are more likely to attend future activities than those parents who do not participate (Westmoreland et.al 2009; Kendall et.al 2008). The positive relationships between parents and the school that occur as a result of the workshops may ultimately contribute to a child's academic outcomes as parents become more engaged in learning (Kendall et.al 2008).

There is some evidence to suggest family learning programs where children and families learn together can result in improved academic attainment for children. Of the programs evaluated in the literature, those that were tailored to the needs of parents and had a clear purpose to improve children's learning outcomes were most effective (Goodall and Vorhaus 2010).

Interventions that target vulnerable parents and carers to support them to develop specific parenting skills can create pathways to improved academic outcomes (Kendal et.al 2008).<sup>8</sup> For instance, some parenting styles have been associated with improved learning outcomes – in particular, parenting which promotes a distinctive dialogue about education between parents and children (Turner, Chandler and Heffer 2009; Chan and Koo 2011).

Some parents, such as those from diverse cultural backgrounds, are conventionally regarded as 'hard to reach'. As noted in Section 2, in the context of parental engagement such attitudes may stem from a lack of recognition of the variety of ways parents might be involved in learning, particularly in relation to activities not directly linked to schooling. More broadly, it has been suggested that the very notion of 'hard to reach' families bears closer attention. For example, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute suggests *'it is more useful to think of them as being people whom services find difficult to engage and retain'* (2010, p. 1). This perspective recognises that problems may lie more with services (including schools) rather than families themselves.

### 5.2.2 Teachers

A barrier to effective parental engagement commonly cited in the literature is a lack of proper recognition by teachers of the potential contribution to learning offered by parental behaviours and support in the home (LeFevre and Shaw 2011; Pushor 2007; Anderson and Minke 2007). This has led to recommendations that teachers be trained to work with, and engage, parents from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (Freebody and Freebody 2010; Westmoreland et al. 2010). Importantly, it is suggested that teachers receiving such training require the opportunity and time to reflect on the rationale for parental engagement and their own role in promoting partnerships with parents (Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008). Teachers need also to become familiar with their school community, so that they are able to better connect with their students' lived experiences and gain an understanding of how education is perceived within that community (Freebody and Freebody 2010).

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<sup>8</sup> Kendal et al. do not provide a concise definition of 'vulnerability', instead relying on the multiple definitions used in the research they review. One useful definition is from Carbone et al. (2004): 'Vulnerable parents might be simultaneously struggling with low incomes, inadequate or insecure housing, health or mental health problems, problematic substance use, or domestic violence. A large number have very limited social supports. Some might lack the knowledge or language to navigate the service system or the confidence and self-esteem to interact with service staff or other parents. Many vulnerable parents 'feel' different or self-conscious as a consequence of the prejudice, discrimination and rejection they encounter or of their own internalised negative self-worth. Distrust of services, or even of other parents, can be very high. Perhaps one of the greatest barriers is parents' fear they will be judged by others as 'bad' parents, or worse still, have their children taken from them by Child Protection' (2004, p.vii).

### 5.2.3 Whole-of-community

The school is not the only place outside the home which influences and contributes to a child's academic achievement and psycho-social development. Community engagement refers to the support and advocacy that organisations outside the school can provide to improve student learning and promote family engagement (Epstein 2002)<sup>9</sup>. Incorporating local businesses, community-based organisations and support services into engagement strategies can be of particular benefit for youth who are considered to be at high risk of poor academic performance. An alliance with a wider array of adult professionals can provide disadvantaged youth with mentors and academic support that they may not be able to receive in the home (Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg 2010). Whole-of community involvement in education can contribute to an overall increase in social capital and positive attitudes to school.

In addition, engaging the community in learning can facilitate increased communication and collaboration between support services beyond the school. For example, 'wrap-around' services exemplify an inter-agency approach that is focused on targeting a hierarchy of needs. Schools as Community Centres (SaCCs) currently operating across New South Wales, and the Nazareth Catholic Community in South Australia, are examples of how support services are being integrated into the school environment (NSW Department of Education and Communities 2010; Nazareth Catholic Community 2012).

### 5.2.4 School plans, school processes and school reform

Integrating parental engagement into a whole-school reform agenda is more effective than developing disparate engagement strategies that are not targeted towards improving education or learning (Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg 2010). In this respect parental engagement has a greater effect if it is embedded into school strategic or development plans so as to engender a whole-school commitment to working with parents and families (Bull, Brooking and Campbell 2008). One way to promote and achieve this is by providing ongoing professional development and technical assistance for principals, teachers and other 'family-facing' staff in schools (Westmoreland et.al. 2009). The training and development of staff contributes to the capacity of schools to develop and implement strategies and initiatives that welcome and support the engagement of parents and families in children's learning.

## 5.3 Strategies for different ages

To have a positive effect on learning outcomes, engagement strategies need to appropriately reflect children's learning trajectories. Thus while parental involvement on school grounds may be more beneficial for children of primary school age (Duckworth et.al 2009; Pomerantz, Moreman and Litwick 2007; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003), high school students are likely to benefit more from parental guidance at home. The level of parental participation in activities such as homework throughout the schooling years may also differ according to the needs of individual students.

It is difficult to identify strategies that are likely to benefit the whole student cohort in particular age groups. However, some principles regarding what works for parents of children of different ages can be discerned from the evidence base.

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<sup>9</sup> The Harvard Family Research Project defines community engagement as 'the support, services, and advocacy activities that community-based organisations – including businesses and faith-based institutions – provide in order to improve student learning and promote family engagement' (Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg 2010, p.3).

### 5.3.1 Early childhood

Best evidence indicates that parental engagement in learning activities in the home is associated with increased cognitive abilities in the early years (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). When children are very young, they can benefit from programs that involve home visits, where parents learn how to positively contribute to their children's growth and development. Engagement strategies for families with young children tend to focus on parent education, children's social and emotional development, and their intellectual skills (Sylva et al. 2004).

Home learning in this age group includes reading, library visits, playing with letters and numbers, learning alphabet letters through play, painting and drawing, teaching nursery rhymes and singing (Sylva et al. 1999 in Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, p. 23). Family engagement in these activities can be strengthened through collaboration between parents and early childhood centres or preschools. The best partnership outcomes are achieved when parents and early childhood professionals establish a mutual understanding of the importance of learning and so allow for a 'continuity of experience for the children' (Siraj-Blatchford et.al 2002 in Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, p. 24). For example, programs that have taught mothers how to use educational materials at home and have supported them with weekly visits have had a positive impact on both children's learning abilities and the confidence of mothers in participating in education (Henderson and Berla 1994).

### 5.3.2 Primary school

Research shows that children tend to do better in their primary school years if their parents participate in activities within the school, maintain interest in their children's progress and develop relationships with their teachers (Henderson and Berla 1994).

Duckworth et.al (2009) showed that parents' educational behaviours with their children are important for their cognitive development, having a significant and independent influence on attainment at age three as well as at entry to primary school. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) found that parents have the greatest impact on academic achievement during the primary school years. While parents are likely to be engaged in schooling and education up until Grade 2, it has been found in the Australian context that this tends to decline from Grade 3 onwards (Muller 2006). This may relate to parents' sense of efficacy in being able to meaningfully contribute to their child's learning as they progress through the school years (Muller 2006).

If positive relationships between teachers, schools, and parents are developed during primary school, parents are more likely to develop confidence about participating in school activities and having an ongoing role as partners in their children's learning. Confidence in parents with regard to their role in learning allows them to engage more in the creation and maintenance of a quality home learning environment.

The effectiveness of a quality home learning environment cannot be overstated. Coupled with a parenting style which is supportive of the child and encourages conversation and exchange between the parent and child (as detailed in section 4.3), a suitable home environment for children in the primary school age cohort incorporates elements of play and fosters a desire to learn.

When children grow older and move into the later primary school years, parents discuss schoolwork, school activities and academic content as part of their daily routine. While at this stage specific discussions about careers and post school destinations may be premature, parents can associate schoolwork with their

child's interests and strengths.

### 5.3.3 High school

Some of the core principles of effective parental engagement, including the need to create positive relationships with teachers, maximise motivation for learning and maintain supportive family relationships, apply to children and adolescents across the age spectrum. However, as previously noted, the nature of effective parental engagement also changes as children move through the schooling years (Kreider et.al 2007).

The transition from primary school into high school presents particular challenges for students and families as the knowledge and skills required to address and achieve school curriculum requirements become more complex and students are faced with important academic and career decisions (Hill and Tyson 2009). This progression through the schooling years can be made easier if parents continue to actively participate in their children's education. Parents do have an important role as motivators and can continue to be engaged in learning in a supportive capacity.

As young people develop their own distinctive identities, they tend to place more value on autonomy in their self-expression and decision-making (Kreider et.al 2007). Parental engagement during the high school years therefore needs to take account of adolescents' desire for independence and their expanding cognitive abilities. Program evaluations have demonstrated that family engagement can have positive results for the educational success of young people when there is a match between their developmental needs, parents' attitudes and practices, and schools' expectations of family involvement (Kendall et al. 2008; Duckworth et.al 2009; Clinton, Hattie and Dixon 2007).

Outside of the school, parents can contribute to their children's educational outcomes by creating a rich learning environment (Jeynes 2005). Parents can discuss options for post-secondary education, stress the value of education in general, provide learning resources such as books and newspapers, and take their children to social events and places that contribute to learning (Hilly and Tyson 2009). They can also help their children maintain positive attitudes towards their own abilities and support them through problems at school (Castambis, Fan and Chen in Henderson and Mapp 2002).

In essence, parental expectations and a parenting style that supports learning continue to have an impact on educational outcomes as children grow older, and have a greater effect on learning outcomes than attending school functions and checking homework (Jeynes 2005).

## 5.4 Strategies for different cultural groups

### 5.4.1 Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families

As previously noted, early approaches to parental engagement have been criticised as following a narrow, prescribed framework that does not adequately reflect the needs of diverse cultural groups (Auerbach 2002; Denessen et al. 2001; Smith and Wohlsetter 2009). While there is certainly some truth to this assertion, there are many programs in Australia and overseas which acknowledge how cultural differences can influence the nature and extent of parental engagement. These programs exhibit common principles and methods for integrating cultural diversity into their activities.

Parents from different cultural backgrounds are often regarded by teachers as being 'hard to reach' and by implication not as interested in their children's education as other parents (Feiler 2010). However, there



is evidence to suggest that parents from different cultural backgrounds are not 'difficult', 'obstructive', or 'indifferent' – the kind of language that is generally ascribed to such groups (Kendel et al. 2008). Rather, it is often the school itself that makes it more difficult for these parents to engage in their children's learning, and in this sense they are 'under-served' rather than 'hard to reach'. It is therefore important when attempting to engage parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to take active steps to listen, and respond, to their particular needs and circumstances. Effective practices include getting to know the barriers for parents or groups of parents, inviting them to participate at school-parent workshops and discussing with them any barriers to their involvement (Kendel et al. 2008).

Schools with well developed strategies to engage parents of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds typically communicate with parents in different languages (where appropriate) and initiate discussions through a variety of communication strategies and technologies (Denessen, Baker and Gierveld 2007). Teachers are provided with information and strategies to help them work across cultures, and schools acknowledge that parents may hold different perspectives on their role in education (Gibson 2006; Kendall et al. 2008). Importantly, when families of diverse backgrounds are involved at the school level, teachers are more aware of cultural and community issues and, in turn, are more likely to engage and reach out to parents in meaningful and effective ways (Freebody and Freebody 2010; Gorinski and Fraser 2006).

#### 5.4.2 Parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in education is acknowledged as being vital for improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (DEEWR 2009). Much of the literature pertaining to partnerships between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families focuses on the importance of establishing a dialogue about learning within the whole community rather than solely concentrating on developing relationships with parents (Freebody and Freebody 2010; Lea et al. 2011; Schwab and Sutherland 2001; Muller 2006).

Schools can assist in creating a wider discussion about education and learning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a variety of ways. Examples of Australian initiatives implemented to date include:

- *Aboriginal Family Education Centres*. These provide opportunities for parental and wider family participation in learning activities with children, and community capacity-building through participation in the development and administration of the centres (Lea et al. 2011).
- *Parental and Community Engagement Program (PaCE): Weung Bueng (mother/father) project*. This project, funded under the PaCE program, is designed to build the capacity, confidence, knowledge, and skills of parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to help their children succeed at school. Workshops delivered as part of the project cover topics such as preparing for school, how to read to children, understanding the school system, helping with homework, and communicating with schools (FaHCSIA 2012).

- *Indigenous Parents' Factor Program: Successful Early Learning at Home and School (IPF)*. This program, developed by the Australian Parents Council, is aimed at engaging parents and carers in the early learning experiences of children before schooling begins and continuing into the early years of formal education (0-8 years). The workshops include a 'train the trainer' component to allow for the continuance of the workshops in the communities after the initial training has taken place. The program also aims to encourage a pattern of adult learning in Indigenous communities (Wildy and Clarke 2010).

### 5.4.3 Refugee groups

Children and families from refugee backgrounds are presented with particular challenges in education that transcend cultural and linguistic differences. These include managing the effects of trauma, separation and disrupted schooling while also negotiating housing, financial demands and a new education system (Foundation House 2009). Accordingly, the experiences of refugee families add considerable complexity to engaging parents in education. For families who have had limited access to education as a result of prolonged conflict and instability in their countries of origin, the challenges to parental engagement are potentially even greater. In order to overcome some of these and develop positive relationships and partnerships between parents and teachers, schools require a sound understanding of specific elements and effects of the refugee experience on families.

Evidence demonstrates that while parents from refugee backgrounds place great value on their children's education, there are a number of issues that inhibit their participation. These include:

- *The process of resettlement*. Adults have many pressing needs to deal with such as housing, health and employment. They may have little physical or emotional energy available to directly support children's learning.
- *Limited experiences of formal schooling prior to arrival in Australia*. Some refugee background families can find the school environment confusing, intimidating and confronting. Children may have had limited access to formal education. Some children and their parents may be illiterate in their own language.
- *School expectations of involvement in children's education*. Many refugee-background families may be unaware that they are required or otherwise expected to visit the school for various meetings and events.
- *Role as educator*. In many cultures, not only are teachers highly respected and considered experts in their field, it is also considered disrespectful to question them or interfere in their work. For this reason, families rarely visit schools or talk to teachers. It is one of the reasons why refugee-background families may find their new role as the school's 'partner' confusing (Foundation House 2009, p.8).

Refugee-background families also often lack the language skills, knowledge, and confidence to support children in a new school system and culture. Schools can play a role in supporting refugee children and families in this transition, through facilitating connections between refugee families and the wider community, and providing linkages to social services and relevant community organisations (Foundation House 2011).

Furthermore, schools have the potential to engage and communicate with refugee-background



families in such a way as to reinforce the point that parental engagement is an important factor in children's academic achievement and overall wellbeing (Foundation House 2009).

Australian schools have trialled a range of strategies to encourage participation by refugee-background parents and carers in school activities. These include:

- *Community gardens.* Families are rostered to care for the garden and the harvest can be a reason for a get-together and shared meals.
- *English classes.* English language teachers come to the school to provide English classes.
- *Multicultural women's groups.* Speakers present information on a range of topics suggested by the group, including parenting, women's health, child development and immigration advice (information sessions take place on the school grounds).
- *Saturday workshops.* A combined workshop held by a number of secondary schools to share information and provide an opportunity for families to raise issues of concern .
- *Parent information sessions.* An information session in partnership with a specific community organisation. Topics include building bridges between school and home and how parents can support each other (Foundation House 2011).

## 6 Conclusions

The literature on parental engagement is extensive. Some of the problems in arriving at definitive conclusions include a lack of an agreed definition, limited measurement of parental engagement and the obvious methodological issues in isolating the relative impact of home and school. Nevertheless, on the basis of the evidence reviewed, the following broad themes are well supported by current research.

Firstly, there is strong consensus, supported by a variety of evidence dating from over 40 years, that positive parental engagement can and does significantly influence student academic attainment. The specific positive impact appears to include higher grades and test scores, higher successful completion of classes, higher graduation rates, and a greater likelihood of commencing postsecondary education. In addition to these educational outcomes, there appears to also be a number of positive developmental outcomes including more regular school attendance, better social and emotional development, and improved pro-social behaviour. These impacts have the potential to be financially quantified, with evidence suggesting that positive parental engagement returns positive financial benefits to the nation.

Secondly, families, schools and communities contribute in unique ways to the learning process. Understanding and measuring the interdependence of these factors, as well as those factors that are 'malleable' (family practices/behaviours, student factors, and the school community), can assist in progressing strategies to improve levels of parental engagement.

Thirdly, the evidence reviewed in this report suggests that parental engagement interventions have the greatest impact when they are focused on linking behaviours of families, teachers and students to learning outcomes. Some of the themes connected with this include the need for:

- strong support from the principal and teachers for this work,
- consistent, positive and trusting relations between the school and parents,
- a clear and shared understanding of the roles of parents and teachers in the process
- strategies focused on local needs and contexts, and
- a variety of communication channels between parents and teachers.

Fourthly, in addition to the need for parental engagement across the age groups (but adjusted to the learning trajectories and age of the child/young person), there are three consistent themes that emerge from the literature as being important to positive parental engagement: academic socialisation, parental role construction, and parenting style. Strategies to promote positive parental engagement need to recognise and incorporate these themes.

On a final note, for the benefits of parental engagement to be realised, it is critical that efforts are guided by the best available evidence. This report has expressed the key messages from the existing evidence in practical terms that can be used by parents, teachers, schools and government to guide parental engagement strategies. Translating this best evidence in policy, practices and programs is the greater challenge, and will require resourcing and commitment by all parties.

Given the clear benefits of positive parental engagement in student learning, by way of improved academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, the report concludes that resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to education reform and the future of Australia.

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