



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Ms Barbara Barker  
Submitting as a: Other (Member Network)  
State: ACT

### Summary

#### Summary response

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The Australian Parent Engagement Network, with the support of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), has undertaken significant work on parent and community engagement in learning as a key means of improving outcomes. Based on this work we suggest the following:

1. Systemic change through both a top-down and bottom-up commitment is required:
  - a. Building capacity at a local community level to drive engagement, promoting parents as active partners, positioning schools as a community resource, empowering families to engage in learning in school, home and public settings
  - b. Cementing the value of parent and community engagement at a whole-of-government level, supported by advocacy and communications on the ground.
2. Institutional change is needed to embed a culture of engagement and evidence-based practice:
  - a. Ensuring parent and community engagement is a universal school 'standard', formalised in school policy and given the same prominence as other contributors to outcomes such as curriculum, school organisation or assessment
  - b. Building on approaches to benchmark and evaluate practice within nationally consistent frameworks

- c. Focusing on strategies to incentivise and reward successful engagement.
- 3. Build the capacity of educators to engage with families and the community by:
  - a. Incorporating parent engagement as a universal component within pre-service training
  - b. Developing and providing in-service professional development for educators on an ongoing basis
  - c. Provide numerous, easily accessible opportunities for educators to connect with parents and the community, including release time, outreach, and emerging technologies
  - d. Supporting networking and information sharing between schools and with the community sector.

## Main submission

### Submission

The Parent Engagement Project (2014-2018) is a major body of research, consultation and practice development which – among other things – has raised the profile of parent engagement (PE) and why it matters, fostered a national PE Network, delivered a landmark PE Conference, appointed and supported local PE Champions and events, examined evidence of program and policy effectiveness, and partnered with other researchers and practitioners with the aim of developing common approaches to practice, measurement and evaluation. The Australian Parent Engagement Network is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, and supported by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). It comprises more than 650 teachers, parents, school leaders, policy makers, community organisations and others concerned to improve educational outcomes for Australian children.

Within this context, this submission focuses on parent and community engagement and the critical role this plays in contributing to educational excellence. A large and growing weight of evidence points to parent engagement as having strong positive effects on educational, social and economic outcomes. The empirical research in this field undertaken over the past 45 years is well documented, soundly based and frequently replicated. We also know that parent engagement can mitigate structural disadvantage; that is, students with engaged parents – no matter what their income or background – are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to participate in higher education. Parent engagement is one tool that can help to close the gap in achievement between children of different socio-economic backgrounds (Monti, Pomerantz & Roisman, 2014).

While numerous studies produce evidence supporting the case for parent engagement, it is perhaps John Hattie's extensive meta-analysis (Hattie, 2009) which is most compelling: that is, the 'parent engagement effect' amounts to the equivalent of adding an extra two to three years' education over a student's school life. With this in mind, we see it as an imperative that a systemic approach is developed in Australia for parent and community engagement, driven by increased capacity-building, institutional reform, and a continued and consistent emphasis on this across settings and sectors.

#### 1) We need to think about systemic change

We cannot think of parent and community engagement in isolation, or as an 'add on' in schools. Neither should parent and community engagement be seen as the sole responsibility of schools. The research shows that family-led, home-based factors (e.g. parental aspirations and expectations, home learning environment) are imperative in producing positive learning outcomes (Fox & Olsen, 2014). We make a clear distinction between these engagement factors, around improved learning, and what could be described as parent involvement (volunteering at events, representation on boards etc.). There is little if any evidence that this kind of involvement improves children's learning outcomes. Effective parent engagement is a partnership where schools recognise and encourage parents' roles and parents reinforce the learning going on in the school. This requires both parties to the partnership to have a shared understanding of what parent engagement means, mutual commitment, good communication and respectful relationships.

For parent engagement to be effectively adopted and embedded, both a top-down and bottom-up commitment is required...a cultural, systemic change across the community.

What can be done to move towards systemic change?

- a. Build the capacity and motivation of parents and the community to drive engagement. Systemic change cannot be driven by schools alone. The beliefs, values and behaviours of community members determine their capacity and motivation to engage (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Schools and education systems can however play a role in changing social norms, attitudes and behaviours around PE:
  - Treating parents as active, equal partners in school planning and through ongoing collaborative learning partnerships. This raises the 'buy in' and beliefs parents have of their own role in their child's learning and engagement with the school (Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2008; Harris, Andrew-Power & Goodall, 2009);
  - Positioning schools as a community-based resource. Shifting perceptions of school to being community structures - as opposed to

government or private providers of educational services - is likely to garner increased collaboration (Otero, 2011). Schools offering integrated, multi-agency programs, services and supports can build community capacity and increase engagement (one emerging case of note is the model developed and being evaluated at Doveton College in Victoria). Such models can be particularly beneficial in engaging 'hard to reach' families more likely to be experiencing disadvantage (Families ACT, 2017; Woodrow et al., 2016); and

- Empowering parents to engage at school and at home. Schools and educators that build in processes for shared learning are more likely to influence parental attitudes and the home learning environment (Emerson et al., 2012). Practical methods that can achieve this include home visiting and outreach, invitations for parents to participate in homework / shared reading etc, involvement of parents in classroom activities, provision of learning kits and tools, and workshops with parents to model and demonstrate how to engage in learning with their children at home (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2004).

b. Promote and advocate the value of parent and community engagement.

Building a groundswell for PE remains crucial for systemic change. Recent emphasis on PE at a national and state / territory policy level is encouraging, but the long-term, gradual nature of systemic change means this has to be consistent and sustained. This will require:

- A whole-of-government(s) shared commitment to PE, underpinned by agreed definitions, policy and practice frameworks, resources and tools, and systems for measurement and evaluation; and
- Continuing promotion and advocacy of PE on the ground, through practitioner networks, community consultation and outreach, resources and tools to support practice and, potentially, communications and social marketing activities to deepen beliefs and norms around the value of parent engagement (ARACY, 2012).

2) Institutional reform is required to embed parent engagement in school cultures and practices

Our work in this field has affirmed that parent and community engagement is happening across schools in Australia, but it is patchy and often dependent on the values, priorities and commitment of individual leaders and educators. Further, in Australia there is limited evaluation of the effectiveness of approaches adopted, with educators often reverting to anecdotal feedback and what they know or are comfortable with.

In light of this, there is a strong case to more broadly and consistently embed a culture of parent and community engagement across all schools in Australia and to support and drive adoption of evidence-based practices that work in context.

What could be done to embed parent engagement within school cultures and practices?

- a. Ensure parent engagement is a universal school 'standard'.

School policies and strategies to engage with families and the community can often be formed in an ad hoc manner, without input from the community, applied inconsistently and can struggle to be sustained in the context of competing priorities. To counter this, parent and community engagement must be positioned as a universal school 'standard', on a par with other contributors to students' social and academic performance and measurable and accountable in much the same manner. This means:

- All schools should be required (and supported with consistent structures and frameworks) to develop a parent engagement policy that is formalised and integrated into their school plan. Research has shown this to be an essential ingredient of success (Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2008; Epstein et al., 2002, Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Straumann & Egger, 2011; Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010);
- Performance and outcomes from this should be measurable in order to motivate school leaders and educators to work towards and deliver stated goals; and
- Parents, families and other community stakeholders should be engaged as active partners in the planning, design and review process, as this is beneficial in creating more sustained parent engagement (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015). On the ground support to help facilitate these processes (for instance through local PE coordinators, funding for consultation processes and tools) would likely be advantageous.

- b. Continue to build on approaches to benchmark and evaluate practice within nationally consistent frameworks.

Schools and school systems should be equipped to a) take stock of what they are currently doing in parent engagement, b) plan and prioritise based on identified gaps and needs and, c) evaluate and review in a cycle of continuous improvement. However, consultations undertaken by ARACY as part of the PE project over the past year suggest that evaluation of what is happening at the school level is sporadic and of varying quality. We do not have the full picture of who is doing what, to what extent and to what degree of 'success.'

In response to this, systems need to support schools to identify what is working and what is not when it comes to parent and community engagement. Key strategies include:

- Continuing to progress work towards a shared definition of PE, underpinned by the main concepts which make a difference on outcomes;
- Developing and agreeing on standardised tools and measures for schools to benchmark and evaluate what they are doing; and
- Supporting the ‘operationalisation’ of measurement and evaluation on the ground, through – potentially – training, expert support personnel, development / refinement of toolkits, material resources etc.

c. Focus on rewarding and incentivising ‘success’:

We note in the Australian Government’s Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes (2016) paper the principle of recognising high performing teachers and rewarding them with increased pay. While caution should be exercised in introducing outcome-based financial incentives which can be subject to distortion of the system (Masters 2012), there is no reason to see why schools and educators that do parent and community engagement well should not be rewarded in some way, whether financially or through other incentives. Other forms of recognition for educators delivering PE can be as or more motivating (Andrews, 2011).

The evidence on how we can best reward educators and schools who do well is not settled, and trial approaches in this area would be warranted. Practice and policy considerations should include:

- Continuing to ensure PE is a core component of (and possibly having a stronger input into) professional standards accreditation and the merit-based progression of educators;
- Developing approaches for non-financial rewards and recognition for educators and / or schools specific to PE. For example, recognised teacher award schemes, peer nominations, school accreditation schemes, promotion of ‘exemplar’ schools;
- Equally, recognising family and community engagement with schools through similar incentive schemes; and
- Scaling up rewards and recognition for high-performing educators developing effective PE in disadvantaged schools.

3) We need to build the capacity of school leaders and educators to engage with their families

Mutually respectful and trusting relationships between educators and the community are a cornerstone of effective engagement (Harris, Caldwell & Longmuir, 2013; Emerson et al., 2012). For this to happen, individual educators need to be equipped to engage with families and the community, and parents need to have clear opportunities and invitations to participate (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

However, educators are not always well placed to foster positive relationships with parents and the community. Barriers include the values and beliefs of individual teachers, their self-efficacy to engage parents, misconceptions and disconnect in the relational dynamics at play, and school systems and (lack of) resources impeding opportunities for engagement (Ferguson et al., 2008; Kendall et al., 2008). Given such barriers, investment and strategies to build the capacity of school leaders and educators to engage with families and the community is strongly encouraged.

What can be done to build the capacity of educators?

- a. Incorporate parent engagement as a core component within pre-service training. Anecdotally it appears there is at best limited focus on parent engagement in pre-service teacher training. ARACY has commissioned work through the Australian Council of Deans of Education to audit the extent of PE content delivered by education faculties across Australia. Early indicators are this will show there is little consistent PE capacity building provided in pre-service courses. Development and incorporation of PE modules into all pre-service teacher training courses should be considered.
- b. Develop and provide in-service training for educators.

We recommend the Review considers options for ongoing professional development in PE for in-service educators. This appears to be ad hoc and inconsistently applied within schools at present.

In terms of guidance for training content and delivery (at both the pre-service and in-service stage), a number of research studies and reviews (ARACY, 2017; Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Warren et al., 2011) posit the following aspects to be addressed:

- Recognition and promotion of the value of PE and the influence of parents, family and the community on a child's learning and development;
- Practical tools and approaches for building relationships and having a conversation with families;
- Training to support teachers' engagement with parents whose backgrounds are very different to their own;

- Practical and experiential content and delivery – e.g. using role play, modelling, in-service field experiences, real case studies and scenarios; and
  - Ongoing school-based collaboration and mentoring between practitioners and across school networks (as opposed to a solely one-off training course).
- c. Build in clear opportunities for educators to connect with parents and the community.

An important factor underpinning case studies where PE is done well is the perception among parents that they are welcomed and have explicit and implicit invitations from school to get involved in their child's learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). However, the capacity of schools and individual educators to engender such opportunities can often be challenged by the multiple responsibilities and competing priorities that they face. Observations from schools that appear to be more effectively engaging with parents and the community (ARACY, 2017; Families ACT, 2017; Freebody & Freebody, 2010) indicate the following strategies can help build this capacity:

- Providing staff release time – even one free lesson a week assigned to teachers to focus solely on parent engagement can prove beneficial. For instance, teachers can use this time to make calls home to parents to share good news, get to know families, professional learning, exchanging knowledge with families;
  - Creating opportunities for engagement and relationship-building outside of school. In particular, 'meets and greets' with students and families prior to the start of the school year and at key transition points. There is evidence that outreach and home visiting can be effective to build relationships and collaboration between teachers and parents, particular with those families who are disengaged and / or experiencing disadvantage (Day, Williams, & Fox, 2009; Huat See & Gorard, 2013); and
  - Funding and supporting online, interactive resources to virtually share experiences between home and school in real time. The emergence of such platforms heralds promise in improving home-school collaboration and communication. However, caution needs to be exercised in relying solely on such tools and the potential emergence of a 'digital divide'.
- d. Provide funding for a clearly delineated position dedicated to parent and community engagement in every school.

A valuable component facilitating connections between schools and the community is the position of a community coordinator / liaison officer (or equivalent) (Families ACT, 2017; Woodrow et al., 2016). However, the funding and implementation of such positions appears variable and contingent on the emphasis placed on this by school leaders and individual education authorities. Such roles can emerge as an 'add on' to a leadership team member or teacher's job, rather than being a specific and distinctly funded position. There is also a risk that PE comes to be seen as a specialist role rather than integral to the work of all teachers and school leaders. However, as a support for the whole of the school community, a clearly delineated community coordinator position can be highly valuable, and help enhance engagement.

- e. Support networking and information sharing between schools and between schools and the community sector.

When it comes to parent engagement, schools and individual educators can end up operating 'in silos'. Indeed, arguments have been made that competition between schools within and across sectors can dissuade more widespread practice-sharing and networking (Hattie, 2016). Nonetheless, the work of the Parent Engagement Network, and indeed the ARACY Parent Engagement Project, suggests appetite exists for stronger collaboration and networking between practitioners and the community, and processes to build and formalise connections should be more widely developed.

#### Concluding remarks

Parent and community engagement is one of the most promising ways to achieve significant gains in educational excellence in Australian schools. Despite evidence suggesting that effective parent engagement delivers the equivalent of two to three years of extra schooling Australia has been slow to recognise the potential in fostering and supporting PE. It is clear that long-term commitment is required across governments, schools and the community to action systemic attitudinal and behavioural change in this area. However, it is also apparent that policy and funding for a number of practical steps can be implemented in the shorter term to contribute towards this goal. In particular:

- Priority needs to be placed on building the capacity of the education sector to foster meaningful parent and community engagement, through universal pre-service and in-service professional development, peer support, rewards and recognition for 'success', and stronger networking opportunities;
- Funding to support schools to collaborate with and empower families and the community should focus on the provision of staff release time for PE, the placement of community liaison personnel within all schools,

and the implementation of effective integrated service models within communities experiencing greatest disadvantage; and

- Increased consistency and standards for parent engagement should be adopted across all schools and sectors. This includes the development of shared definitions, measures, protocols and tools for evaluation.

## References

A full list of references consulted for this submission is available on request.