

DIMENSION 3:

Family and Community Engagement

Student learning is supported by families and the broader community working in partnership with the school.



“Effective schools establish links and build relationships with a broad range of people and organisations to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for their students... These relationships provide access to expertise, facilities, resources, support and services, opening up additional opportunities for students to reach their full potential and achieve outcomes. Schools that partner with families and community-based organisations create a network of support for student wellbeing and engagement. Such networks can mitigate against barriers to student learning.”

(Building Communities, FISO Continua of Practice for School Improvement 2018, Victorian DET)



Dimension 3

http://inllen.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/JTD_TG_Dimension03.pdf



Families are key to ensuring equitable learning pathways for children that include high-quality in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities. More than 50 years of research tells us that family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of children’s development, educational attainment, and success in school and life.

(Engaging Families to Transform Education, Executive Summary, Global Family Research Project)

Family-school partnerships positively affect student behaviour, achievement, attendance, school retention, motivation and self-esteem. Reduced use of drugs and alcohol and fewer instances of violent behaviour also result. For families they provide a sense of connectedness and enhanced self-efficacy. While for schools benefits include improved teacher morale and retention, more support from families, higher student achievement, improved community perception and sustained school improvement. A whole school approach is the most effective but do not let a culture that is not there yet prevent you from improving your own practice.



The terms ‘engagement’ and ‘involvement’ are often used interchangeably, however, in reality they produce very different outcomes. Involvement is what parents do to support the school and is a subset of engagement. Dr Debbie Pushor states that engagement “enables parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers’ knowledge.” (Pushor, 2007)



It is important to also recognise that “of an estimated 6000 waking hours each year young people spend 1000 in school, and 5000 at home or in their community.” (Centre for Real-World Learning, 2010) Understanding where your families are is therefore critical.



Family engagement is a philosophy and a pedagogy of walking alongside ... it’s all relational and best achieved with a whole school approach!

How to strengthen your family engagement practice

The “extra” work you put into partnering with families will ultimately decrease your workload and make your job more enjoyable and fulfilling.

1. Watch the [Family Engagement Circle © video](#)

The Circle © provides the basic components of good practice: Why (Beliefs), How (Process) and What (Results). It allows Family Engagement Teams to work within the [Family Engagement Continuum ©](#) and develop, plan and implement practices and programs within their own school context that enhance effective partnerships and student learning.

2. Analyse your current practice

Bring together a Family Engagement Team comprised of teachers, wellbeing, leadership, office staff, parents and community partners. Gather and review data and evidence from staff and families through surveys/focus groups/other existing data sets. You may wish to utilise the following tools:

- a. [How Family-friendly is your school](#)
- b. [Parent Engagement in Action](#) - Toolkit that includes consultation and survey templates for staff, students and families
- c. Utilise the Family Engagement Continuum © and [rubric](#) to establish which partnership school category best describes your school. (Beyond the Bake Sale—The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships” (2007) by Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies)



<http://www.familyengagementcircle.org.au/>

3. Determine priorities

This is best achieved through use of an audit tool:

a. Parent Engagement in Action

- o Guide
- o Toolkit

b. Strengthening Family and Community Engagement in Student Learning Resource.

A seven dimension framework developed for the Australian DET that builds on Joyce Epstein's original six dimensions

- o Framework
- o School Assessment Tool

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships provides direction for the development of effective high impact strategies and initiatives that are linked to learning. (Partners in Education – A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (2013) by Mapp and Kuttner) Doing with and not for!

A number of resources have been developed to support schools to better engage with families from diverse backgrounds. These include:

- **Arabic Welfare** - A Guide to Engaging Arabic Speaking Families
- **Foundation House** – Schools and Families in partnership: A Desktop Guide to engaging families from refugee background in their child's learning
- **Centre for Multicultural Youth** – Opening the School Gate: Engaging migrant and refugee families

Other resources:

Valuable Parent Engagement resources can be found on the CEM website.



<https://www.cem.edu.au/Our-Schools/Curriculum-Learning-Programs/Student-Wellbeing/eXcel/Family-and-Community-Engagement.aspx>

These include:

- Leading Family School Partnerships – Guide and video
- Community Conversations – Video and Guide
- Family School Partnership statement: animation
- Anne Henderson – what does a successful partnership school look like? (Author of Beyond the Bake Sale)

What you do is important but how you do it makes all the difference.



Good practice examples:

- **Welcome phone calls/letters/cards** - introducing yourself and your desire to get to know the family
- **Home visits** – provide an opportunity to get to know families where they are and build trust
- **Back-to-school /Open House** – an opportunity to gather your learning community in your classroom
- **Hopes and Dreams letter** – families share their hopes and dreams for their child
- **Learning Walks** – Walk through the learning spaces to observe and experience the students and staff engaged in learning
- **Positive phone calls** – reinforcing achievement/good behaviour
- **Family Conferences** – re-thinking Parent Teacher Interviews to allow time for students to share their learning, for questions, and for planning how the school and families can work together to better support that child’s learning
- **Community Conversations** – a conversation where staff, families and other members of the school’s learning community come together to think, discuss and explore solutions to challenges
- **Community Day** – a day focused on involving, honouring and enjoying the community and all it has to offer
- **Parent focus groups** – to seek parent opinion and strengthen parent voice

4. Implement planned activities

It is essential that both your activities and communication focus on the “Why“, not the “What“, and are explicitly linked to learning – understanding learning in the classroom / how to support learning at home or in the community. Ensure that your communication plan includes all stakeholders, utilises multiple channels, appropriate languages and allows time for families to plan for their participation. An evaluation plan is also required to ensure that you collect and utilise feedback from all stakeholders. Now it is time to implement the activities identified and developed in the step above.

5. Evaluate & Update

The final step for the Family Engagement Team is to collect and review the evaluation data, make any appropriate changes to the activity, and ensure that it is fully documented and communicated.



CONSIDERATIONS

Are your parents hard to reach or is it in fact you and your school that is hard to reach by parents who do not feel welcomed or know who to approach for support?

Do your parents understand what and how their child is learning and how they may work with you to support that learning at home or in the broader community?

When planning & developing activities, always ensure that they are:

- relational
- inked to learning
- collaborative
- interactive
- developmental

Why should schools also work in partnership with their broader community?

School-community partnerships are ideal for solving a challenge that the school alone cannot solve. This can be due to a lack of knowledge, skills or resources. Like family partnerships, they focus on improving the academic and wellbeing outcomes for students but in doing so, also have the potential to support and build the capability of families and school staff.

For clarity, when referring to the broader school community it is inclusive of business, government, community organisations and other education providers. Equally, partnership is a two-way non-hierarchical relationship where co-creation is the norm. It is not a fee for service relationship.

When considering who to partner with, it is important to first ensure that the school has clearly identified the need/purpose

(Why) and has evidence to support. The “How” and the “What” will be developed collaboratively. Once the purpose for partnering is clear, the appropriate partner(s) will be easier to identify and get onboard.

Effective and sustainable school-community partnerships are led by the school, well governed, with purpose and process mutually agreed, and a culture of equity and transparency has led to trust and respect. Like other relationships, partnerships continue to evolve over time so for succession planning purposes it is important to ensure that key documents such as a Memorandum of Understanding, Terms of Reference, Strategic Plan, Evaluation Framework and Tools are developed and kept current. Flexibility is key as the purpose may also change over time to better meet the current needs of students, their families and the school.

Using the [FISO Continua of Practice for School Improvement](#) as a guide, the key ingredients for excellence in school-community partnerships are:

- The school as a whole is community-focused and outreach oriented
- It functions as a community hub
- Co-located services share information and work together to provide integrated service delivery
- Partnerships deepen and enrich teacher and student learning and innovation
- Partnerships support a holistic approach in targeting services to meet the health, wellbeing and learning needs of students and their families
- The school has an integrated approach to learning, health and wellbeing focused on providing group-based and individual student support, workforce capacity building, parent/carer information sessions and provision of specialised services

Another useful guide to developing an enduring partnership is the *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Joyce L. Epstein and Associates developed this very comprehensive handbook, upon which many more recent frameworks and guides are based. Epstein’s School-Community Action Team model is a valuable tool for solving complex challenges within a school setting.



Case Study

Following completion of the JTD Transition Review Process, William Ruthven Secondary College, a medium sized co-educational secondary school in Melbourne's inner north, identified that strengthening their connection to the broader community would assist them in solving two key challenges in supporting their students' transition into and within the school:

- Improving student/parent awareness of mental health and the supports available for all students and families in Year 4-9
- Improving male Years 7-9 engagement in their learning and connection to the school

Realising that they were unable to fully address these challenges on their own, and without strong connections to local agencies due to geographic isolation and new staff, this highly multicultural school partnered with the Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN) to assist them in developing a School-Community Action Team (SCAT). Once the goals for the SCAT had been identified by the school, appropriate community agencies were approached for membership based on their geographic location, potential support, capacity to engage and appropriate skills and knowledge. Senior representatives from five local agencies agreed to provide in-kind support to the school .

Meeting once per term, the SCAT first invested time in getting to know and understand each other's settings, in particular unpacking the goals set by the school, before collaboratively developing a Terms of Reference and Strategic Action Plan. By the third meeting the Action Plan had been refined and implementation of the collaborative actions was underway. INLLEN continued to support the school in the first year to develop the SCAT before transitioning to wholly school led early in the second year.

Two years on, the Assistant Principal continues to lead the SCAT and to ensure its' sustainability, the SCAT is now reportable to the School Council. Partners have changed over time due to staff changes both at the school and partner organisations, as well as to better meet the current needs of the students, staff and families. The scope of the work has also broadened to a whole school approach and encompasses some key goals to support senior transition. Current partners remain committed to supporting the school and continue to meet once per term to progress collaborative actions.

"We have discovered on our journey of creating a SCAT that working in partnership with local community agencies is a great way to enhance community education within our school, and embed proactive support for staff, students and families." Assistant Principal