

Effective Partnerships in Practice

A qualitative research project on family, school and community partnerships.



**Family-School
& Community
Partnerships
Bureau**

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Introduction

This research project was commissioned by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, a joint venture of the Australian Parents Council (APC) and the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), in July 2008.

The focus of this research was on parental engagement and best practice in building family-school and community partnerships. Its purposes were to:

- add to existing knowledge about the status of family-school and community partnerships in Australia;
- identify best practice in this field;
- add impetus to the formation of family-school and community partnerships;
- provide the basis for the development of documents for the advancement of the partnerships ideal for use at conferences and other forums, and
- provide the basis for proposing changes to teacher training.

This project followed on from an action research project carried out by this firm in 2005 on behalf of APC and ACSSO, in which 61 schools across Australia participated. On that occasion, the 61 schools were given grants of, in most cases, \$10,000 from the Commonwealth for the purpose of establishing partnership projects. From that research came many lessons and ideas about how partnerships can be created. The report from that research was published by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (as it then was) in July 2006.¹

In the current research, there were four broad areas of inquiry:

1. How to engage parents in a partnerships project.
2. How to sustain a partnership project.
3. Resourcing a partnership project.
4. Evaluating a partnership project.

¹ *Saulwick Muller Social Research. 2006. Family-School Partnerships Project: A Qualitative and Quantitative Report. Commonwealth of Australia.*

Each of these had emerged as significant aspects of partnerships projects during the 2005 work. In addition, the present research included an inquiry into whether and how the partnership ideal had broadened to include the community, as well as families and schools, and with what results.

Some of the best work discovered in the 2005 study did have a community element, sometimes very extensive, with far-reaching benefits for the community as well as the school, the students and their families. Where this occurred, the benefits to each tended to reinforce the benefits to the others: where communities were strengthened, relationships between school and families also flourished; similarly, as the family-school partnership grew, community cohesion and capacity also tended to grow. As this report will show, these patterns were found to exist still.

This study was carried out by the principal of this firm, Dr Denis Muller, in collaboration with Brenton Holmes from the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau.

This report was written by Dr Muller.

We would like to thank most sincerely the principals, teachers and parents who gave so generously of their time and spoke frankly and informatively about their experiences.

We would also like to thank APC and ACSSO for the opportunity to carry out this most interesting and, we believe, educationally vital research. We would be happy to discuss the findings at any mutually convenient time, and trust that it will contribute to the advancement of the family-school and community partnership ideal.



Dr DENIS MULLER
Principal

October 2009

Summary of main findings

This summary is arranged into the four broad areas of inquiry:

1. Engagement
2. Sustainability
3. Resourcing
4. Evaluation and effects on students.

Engagement

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.

To understand this capacity-building function more fully, it is necessary first to understand how partnerships engage parents and members of the wider community. Engagement is where the capacity-building starts. It breaks down barriers and opens people to the possibilities of personal and community growth.

Effective partnerships flourish in all kinds of socio-economic settings. The secret is to connect with families and communities in ways that answer their needs.

The schools in this study serve communities across the full spectrum of socio-economic circumstance. Their work shows that partnerships that are the product of a genuine partnership attitude by the school, that are responsive to the needs of parents and communities, and that grow organically as the needs change, are successful and sustainable.

In middle to high socio-economic settings, the need may be to participate actively in the education of children and to contribute to the enrichment of the education program. In these settings, the pressure of time can be a barrier to parental engagement. This can be overcome by carefully managing the time commitment parents are asked to make, and by ensuring that the parents feel they are making a difference. The partnership needs to be real and its work substantial.

In low socio-economic areas, the needs can be numerous and acute. In these areas too barriers need to be overcome. Four barriers are common.

1. LOW PARENTAL SELF-ESTEEM

Many parents in low socio-economic areas had bad experiences at school, left early with few qualifications and do not place a high value on education. Many lack confidence in their ability to learn or to be of any help in their children's education. Where the school is concerned, they tend to be shy and inarticulate. They keep to themselves, or look for ways to get into the school unobtrusively.

2. ISOLATION

This lack of self-esteem and self-confidence contributes to social isolation. For many it is made worse by unemployment and poverty. Unable to obtain a place in the workforce, they retreat to their homes, cannot afford to go out, and are sometimes so reliant on their children for company they keep the children at home instead of sending them to school.

3. EFFECTS OF SOME CULTURAL NORMS

There are also cultural causes of isolation, not connected with poor education, low self-esteem or poverty, but with the traditional role of women in certain immigrant communities. These women too are housebound, with no culturally acceptable social outlets. This is particularly common in orthodox Muslim households.

Parents from some other ethnic backgrounds, especially Asian, are acculturated to placing teachers on a pedestal, regarding them as unapproachable and certainly not to be questioned. This inhibits them from engaging in effective communication with the school.

Also among some immigrant parents is a single-minded determination to establish themselves in their new country and to give their children the best possible material security. This impels them to work night and day, leaving limited time for engagement with school, even though they place a high value on education.

4. LANGUAGE

Parents who speak little or no English also find it difficult to communicate with schools. This can magnify the isolation that arises from the other causes mentioned above.

Schools that succeed in engaging parents find ways to overcome these barriers. They are described in the case studies, but they share a few key characteristics:

- They are responsive to the needs of the parents and the community. They do not seek to impose a model or means of engagement, but listen to what parents and communities are saying.
- They reach out. They don't wait for parents or communities to come to them. They don't rely just on newsletters or other impersonal forms of communication. They go out among the parents and the community, inviting them in.
- They offer initial leadership but then hand over as much ownership as possible to the parents and community. They actively try to break down the old power relationships between parents and teachers.
- They explicitly value the contribution of parents.
- Where cultural norms are an issue, the school finds a trusted parent or other intermediary from the community who understands the sensitivities and cultural requirements, and is then responsive to them.
- Where language is an issue, the school communicates with the parents in their mother tongue, sometimes capitalising on this to advance the teaching of the mother tongue to the students, and creating opportunities for the parents to learn English.

This approach kick-starts a cycle in which self-esteem and effective communication grow. As they do so, capabilities increase. As capabilities increase, self-esteem grows more, and communication further improves.

A further important factor in engagement is the attitude of the parent body towards those who might be different ethnically, linguistically and culturally from the majority. Inclusiveness is essential. In one project reported here, it is the main focus.

Sustainability

A key ingredient in sustainability is continuity of personnel. Best of all, this means continuity of principal, but continuity of staff and of involved parents is also important. In places where the principal has changed or now is able to give fewer resources to the partnerships project, the continued commitment of staff and parents sustains it.

This continued commitment is based on a strong belief in the value of the project. This indicates that if the project has developed in response to real parental and community needs, its value will be recognised and commitment will follow.

Among the eight schools that were also in the 2005 study, five are still running their partnerships project. In one, the project has broadened significantly. In three of the other four, the original projects have become consolidated and are in robust health. In the fourth, the partnership project has survived the loss of the staff member who was dedicated to run it, and it is now very much in the hands of the parent leadership group.

The resilience of all these projects is grounded in commitment by the principal plus the continuing involvement of key parents and sometimes by the voluntary contribution of former staff.

The commitment by the principals derives from a combination of factors: recognition that the partnership improves students' life chances; an ideological outlook that steers them towards responding to the needs of parents and communities, and an outgoing and confident personality that prefers engagement to detachment.

The commitment by parents very often is grounded in personal growth and a consequent generosity of spirit. Many have themselves felt the benefits of being involved in these projects

and now want others to share those benefits. They gain great personal satisfaction from their involvement and it continues to help them learn and grow.

The commitment shown by some staff is extraordinary:

- A teacher who was central to establishing a project has retired but continues to be involved as a volunteer.
- A person who had been a parent liaison officer but who was laid off when the school decided it had to put the money into literacy and numeracy programs, continues to be involved unofficially and unpaid in the background, helping and advising the parents in whose hands the project now rests.
- A guidance officer who was central to a partnerships project has moved to another school but continues to hold together a network of parents who were involved in the project and who still face challenges with their children.

Sustainability is at risk in a couple of schools, where parents say that if they personally pulled out or could not continue, they doubted very much whether the partnership would survive. In one case this was because it was difficult to find enough parents to create a succession plan; in another case it was a consequence of budget cuts that had meant the departure of a parent liaison staff member, leaving this work in the hands of volunteer parents only.

In the schools where the partnerships project had not survived, the common factor was the departure of the principal. The essential character of the schools had been maintained, and the role of parents was recognised, but it was being lived out in a different way. Parents were still invited to be involved, but it tended to be on a one-on-one basis and linked to the specific problems of their own children. The outreach element of the partnerships project, and broad community sweep, had gone or were significantly reduced.

In one case a staff member who had been involved in the original project was still there and still doing fine work among the students, with the support and admiration of the new principal, but

the program as a whole had ended, and two key staff – the former principal and the guidance officer – had moved on to other schools.

In another case, the principal and the school psychologist had moved on. These people had been at the centre of the project, which included creating a special room for parents and organising a series of TAFE courses for them. These outreach initiatives have ceased. However, a room for the community has been retained, and after-school homework classes are run there, in the presence of any members of the community to happen to be there. Some features of the original program also survive: a breakfast club, now run by a local youth organisation; involvement in NAIDOC and Multicultural Awareness week, to keep alive the ideal of promoting inter-racial tolerance that was a centrepiece of the original program.

Although the original project, as an interconnected collection of initiatives co-ordinated by the school psychologist and driven by the principal, has ended, many of its activities remain. The new principal expresses a strong commitment to community and parental involvement, and has extensive experience in achieving this in his previous schools.

So the partnerships projects have left a legacy, even where they no longer continue in their original form.

Resourcing

Resourcing is a problem everywhere. Projects usually depend on the goodwill of staff and parents to give their time, the determination of the principal to find enough money somewhere, and the capacity of the school to provide premises and cover overheads.

It is related to sustainability, as we have just seen. People can only go on at a certain level of intensity for so long. Principals can pull only so many budgetary rabbits out of the hat.

As was seen in the 2005 study, the creation of a parent liaison person was in many schools critical to the success of the partnership project, and many schools spent their grant money employing such a person. Some of those posts have gone because the principal has higher spending priorities.

In other places, the former staff have continued in voluntary or unofficial capacities to work in the projects. These are substantial altruistic off-balance-sheet contributions to the education of young people and to community capacity-building.

Yet the long-run social and economic benefits of parental engagement in their children's education are well-established. They were described in a separate report by Dr Muller prepared for the Australian Parents Council in 2009. That report, based on a world-wide literature review, stated:

Schools that generate partnerships with parents and the community also generate parental engagement in the education of children. Children do better educationally when their parents are engaged in their education. Engagement of the community leads to a building of social capital. Children who grow up in circumstances where their parents are engaged in their education, and in communities that enjoy high social capital, develop better cognitive and non-cognitive skills, both of which contribute directly to academic progress, participation in employment and economic well-being.²

There is substantial evidence that investment in family-school and community partnerships generates two specific economic benefits:

- long-run savings on welfare and on the consequences of anti-social behaviour, and
- the generating of substantial off-budget contributions to education and community capacity-building from those who become committed to the partnership projects.

The amounts do not have to be large. This research suggests that between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per school annually would be sufficient. The value-for-money return is extremely high. This is because of the long-run benefits and because people are not in it for the money. They are in it for altruistic reasons.

The importance of the money lies in its giving the school scope to embed the project and give those working in it confidence that it can be there for the long haul.

² Muller, D. 2009. *Parental Engagement: Social and Economic Effects*, Australian Parents Council.

The view from the school level is that education departments are wary about providing funds because it is difficult to measure the effects. It is understood by schools that departments wish to spend money where effects are measurable and on things that they are vulnerable on, such as students' performance in tests.

What appears from the school level to be not yet widely appreciated by departments is the connection between student performance and parental engagement achieved through family-school and community partnerships.

Evaluation and effects on students

Most schools do evaluate their partnership project, but in ways that are internal and informal.

When they discuss what they might do by way of evaluation, it turns out that they collect lots of simple data, such as attendance figures, turnover of participants, truancy rates, number of workshops or activities, and so on. They usually don't write them up or doing anything much with them except use them to guide their future decisions. This is sensible, of course, but it would be a simple step, in most cases, to have some formal conclusions drawn about effectiveness.

Measuring parental and community engagement by keeping track of the number of activities and the number of people who are engaged by them is straightforward and mostly done already.

Measuring the effects of students is more complex and depends to a large extent on the closeness of the connection between the project and student performance. Projects that involve an early learning centre, for example, tend to produce data comparing the performance, in standardised tests or school-readiness assessments, of students who did or did not attend the centre. This by no means proves a direct causal link, of course, because many other variables are in play, but it is a useful indicative measure.

In this study, all the evidence is anecdotal and qualitative. Much of it – such as effects on parental self-esteem – is not easily amenable to measurement without specialised psychological

assessments. But qualitative research findings are powerful when they all point the same way, and the results of this research, and that of 2005, do so.

Moreover, the partnership project described in Case Study 5 has been evaluated independently by researchers from the University of Melbourne. The findings from that report³ are similar to the findings from this research.

Evaluation takes time and money. Schools are generally short of both and would prefer to put what they do have into the project itself or into other programs for the students. Unless they receive specific funding for the partnership project, they feel under no obligation to spend any more time and money on evaluation than what they think is necessary to satisfy themselves that what they are doing is worthwhile. That is why it tends to be informal and done internally.

³ Warr, D., 2007. *Outside the School Gates*, McCaughey Centre: VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health and Community Well-being, University of Melbourne.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken for this research. This was considered the best way to gather the detailed, varied and nuanced evidence necessary to meet the research objectives. It also replicated so far as was appropriate the approach taken in the 2005 study.

The data-gathering consisted of depth interviews at nine schools across Australia. At each school, interviews were conducted with the principal, the staff who were directly involved in, or responsible for, the partnership project, and parents who were involved in the partnership project.

Seven of the schools were from the Government sector and two from the Catholic sector. Three were secondary schools and six were primary schools. The schools were located in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT. All were in metropolitan areas.

Eight of the nine were in the 2005 research referred to in the introduction, and a new one was added where interesting work on partnerships was discovered by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau.

The rationale for selecting schools on this basis was that people usually learn best from success stories.

As in 2005, interviews were conducted with the principal, any staff involved in the partnerships project, and parents involved in the project. Where some other person had been involved – for example, as a local area co-ordinator of community services –that person too was interviewed. Nearly all the interviews were conducted in person. A small number were conducted by telephone, and these were with parents who were not able to be present for the site visit. A total of 40 interviews were conducted, with the fieldwork carried between August and November 2008.

The interview schedules used are attached as Appendix I.

Case studies

Case 1: Student Well-being Committee

The school

This is a government secondary school of more than 1200 students in an established middle to upper-middle class suburb of Adelaide. Its current intake of Year 7 students from within its immediate neighbourhood has been diminished as part of the general trend towards non-government schools, but it attracts many students from further afield because of its good reputation over a long period of time. An Assistant Principal said that the “supermarket perception” was that “you’ll go here because it’s a good school -- traditional, older”.

It has a broad ethnic demographic, with 62 nationalities represented.

The project

In 2004, the school established a committee to focus on the well-being of students. A Deputy Principal was appointed with specific responsibility for this work, and has been chair of the committee since its inception. Parents make up the largest group on the committee, with nine of the seventeen members. There are also five students, two staff and a pastoral support worker.

The committee does not make heavy demands on the members’ time – it meets a couple of times each term – but it is integrated into the decision-making processes of the school. It is used by the school as a sounding board for a whole range of issues of concern to parents, and it reports to the school council. It has a policy-making role, including conducting a review of the school’s drug policy and procedures. It was part of a project on relationships and sexual health; it contributed to an initiative to improve school attendance, conducted a workshop on cyber-bullying, and participated in decision-making about retention strategies, community involvement of students, student safety, and reconfiguring the start of the school year.

It initiated the introduction of a conflict-control program called *Rock and Water*.

It can be seen that this committee deals with matters of substance, has a direct influence on school policy and procedures, and is integral to the dialogue between the school and parents. Having a deputy principal dedicated to its work ensures that it retains momentum and that its voice is continually heard. The Principal said: “The fact that a D/P has been driving things has helped considerably.”

Engagement

It started with the idea that the school needed to have a group of parents who would raise issues of importance to them. The Principal said: “It became formalised along the way. It is now a very significant sub-committee of school council.”

The D/P spoke of the loyalty shown by committee members, noting that many had remained for the whole of the four years to date.

Asked about whether this indicated that the parents on the committee constituted an elite, the D/P replied:

They do. The nature of the group is that they work in very high-powered jobs – CEOs and high up in government departments and universities. So they are not representative. But they are also part of the community, and their neighbours’ kids go to the school as well. So when we offer the workshops about cyber-bullying and restorative justice and parents as career partners, we get a wider spread.

And we have things like acquaintance nights and we get 600 or 700 people to those.

And they’ve got the boys who don’t want to be at school too. Just because they happen to be CEOs doesn’t mean their kids are all striving to be rocket scientists.

And they’re out there at weekends watching their kids play sport and they’ll talk about some of these things, and so they come to these meetings not only with their own impressions but with their neighbours’.

Ideally you’d love to get everybody, but you don’t.

The D/P said that the school had created a welcoming environment, and offered probably 10 opportunities a year for a parent to come in for a parent-focused night. “But it’s certainly a ‘come into us’; it’s not an outreach.”

The Principal was seen as having a strong commitment to developing partnerships between the school and families. The school had produced a document called “Parent Involvement in Student Learning at [name] High School”. The D/P said:

That’s been generated by our principal, and it’s about underpinning the link between home and school and effective information and communication strategies.

Asked about this, the Principal said:

Parents’ contribution to the success of their kids is enormous. Some kids succeed in school in spite of their parents, but the more common case is that if your parents support you, you will succeed.

However, the reality is that many teachers find it difficult to maintain the links with the family. Some of these kids are 17 or 18 years old, and you get into all sorts of grey areas about who the teacher is answerable to [student or parent].

Having parents engaged in policy-making and decision-making gave the Principal an advantage in dealing with difficult situations:

A good example is teenage alcoholism. That’s become a higher profile issue in the school and has enabled me as principal to take a more public stand about it, knowing there is a committee of parents there who have raised it as an issue and see it as a really big concern, and will support the school in taking a strong position.

So that makes it easier for me to write to all the parents of the rowing club, for instance, and say the school urges you to be very careful about any activities after Head of River, and these are the risks associated with your kids being involved.

Parents on the committee appreciate the level of influence and the fact that the committee deals with matters of substance. It also keeps them in touch.

[We talk about] matters of substance. For example, the pastoral care workers talk to us about the kind of programs they’re doing. We get the “glossy” information but we also get the opportunity to comment. I absolutely think we discuss topics of value.

What we discuss, where relevant, is discussed at the school council meeting, and one of our committee belongs to the school council.

I enjoy the discussions. I like knowing what’s going on in the school and in the Department. I enjoy being with other parents and it isn’t a huge time commitment: one or two meetings per term. It’s my way of doing something and I have found it useful, as a parent.

Sustainability

Five factors have been crucial to the sustainability of this project:

1. The existence of a staff member who is formally dedicated to it.
2. A culture that is open to parents, and values their role in the education of their children.
3. The substantial nature of the work the committee does and its linkage into the decision-making processes of the school.
4. Continuity of school and parent personnel.
5. A focus on students.

Asked to state the critical factors for sustainability, the Principal said:

The formalisation, the [staff member's] leadership, the fact that has become a sub-committee of school council, that it meets on a regular basis, and the composition of the parents has been fairly constant. It's changed, but there are parents on that committee who have been there for as long [as it has existed]. Continuity.

Q: Would you rather put your resources into cultivating this little patch of people rather than trying to go for much wider engagement?

I would much prefer to work to support this group, which has a track record and which has good leadership and a clear focus. They probably are elitist in terms of their socio-economic background, but they still bring to the table the same issues that affect any family – mental health, alcohol, bullying, pornography.

I have absolutely no doubt that if there was a serious issue in the school, we'd find out about it through this group.

We hit on the best connection with the community, which is basically the wellbeing of the kids.

Note that the Principal placed higher value on working closely with a committed group of parents, even if relatively small in number, than trying to attain wider engagement. The moral would seem to be, work with those you can engage with, and don't be discouraged if that is not many. He also pointed to the involvement of staff, because it brought continuity:

The fact that a couple of staff members have also followed through and supported it has also been important because so often with these things, it falls over when the person who started it goes.

The D/P concurred, adding that the development of an encouraging, non-judgmental, respectful attitude toward parents were the essential ingredients of sustainability. A parent endorsed this:

It's to do with [the D/P's] style and commitment. She's open, communicative, respectful, and I get the sense that she values our input.

Resourcing

The school has been willing to invest a Deputy Principal's salary, or at least a large proportion of it, in the project. The Principal saw this as essential, and expressed doubt that the initiative would work without that level of staff involvement. "You need that person at that senior executive level of the school to carry through things." He also attached high priority to the project, and recognised the generosity of the staff and parents involved:

What we've established with that committee is so significant, we would not give it up, so we would find the resources to keep it going. A lot of it is parents giving up their own time and making that in-kind contribution.

Q: What resources are required to keep it going?

The good nature and effort of the staff member. For someone to come back after hours and work with parents – it's not easy work.

This is the first time in my experience that someone has had written into their job description that they will convene this kind of committee and do these things.

Otherwise you rely on people's enthusiasm, commitment and time, and all of those things can be in short supply.

Being savvy about grants can also be important and, as this example from the Deputy Principal shows, having a staff member who knows the terrain can be an advantage:

The Rock and Water program was part of our enterprise bargaining because of media hits about kids being naughtier in schools, so I applied to the Department for two-and-a-half grand to do this program for 20 kids. One of the things the union is doing is campaigning for programs to support teachers dealing with the different behaviours we are seeing nowadays. I sourced this program, applied and got the money. We got a grant for \$5000 to train our Year 11 students to work with our Year 8 students on safe partying.

In the frugal context of most school budgets, this was significant money:

I get a budget for student development which is \$1000 for the year. There aren't many sandwiches that go on the table.

Evaluation and effect on students

As is often the case with partnership projects, measuring the effect on the students is difficult. Asked if the work of the committee had had any effect on the well-being of students, the Principal replied:

It's really hard to measure that. My sense is yes, and it's beneficial.

It was clear from the interviews that any benefits were unlikely to be quantifiable, given the nature of the project, its objectives and way of working. For example, the Principal had said that the committee's stand on teenage drinking strengthened his arm in warning the parents generally about alcohol consumption after the Head of the River rowing regatta. Even assuming this had led to a reduction in alcohol consumption by the students on that occasion, quantifying that effect and establishing a causal link to the Principal's and the committee's stand would be difficult, if not impossible, given the independent variables likely to affect such an outcome.

It is possible to think of other ways to measure the effects of the program, such as the number of parents involved and attendance at meetings, but these are distant proxies – if they are proxies at all – for effects on students, beyond the general and widely known effect that students usually do better when their parents are involved in their education.

The Principal's sense that the project is beneficial to the students is backed up by his preparedness to spend the best part of a Deputy Principal's salary on it and his determination – if push came to shove – to find some way of resourcing it if the existing funds were cut off. This falls short of quantified measurement of effects, but it is telling qualitative evidence that the project probably is beneficial in the way it was intended to be.

Case 2: A program to bring parents into the classroom

The school

This is a Catholic primary school in an inner northern suburb of Perth that is being steadily gentrified. The school serves a middle-class demographic, and is growing rapidly. From an enrolment of just over 400 in 2005, it will reach about 700 over the next six years as a second stream of students is progressively introduced.

The Principal, staff and parents are concerned to ensure that this does not strain or dilute the culture of family-school partnership that has been developed by the current Principal and his predecessor over many years.

This school was a best-practice school in the 2005 research. Since then, the basic program has remained intact, but the application of the model has been broadened to include purchasing of classroom infrastructure as well as pedagogical programs.

The project

The project has now been running for about eight years. It began when a Year 1 teacher was approached by a number of parents who wanted to assist in the classroom. Instead of simply inviting parents in to help in the usual way, the school ran a series of workshops to train parents in the specifics of how literacy and numeracy was being taught. From the parents who attended the workshops, volunteers were invited to come into the classroom and help teach these subjects.

When new pedagogical programs and materials were needed, the teachers made presentations to the P&F on the detailed content of the materials and put the case for acquiring them. It was on this basis that the P&F funded the purchase. When the materials arrived, demonstrations were arranged to bring parents up to speed with them. Workshops followed to show parents how to use these resources at home. The objective was to have consistency between what was being taught at school and the assistance children were getting at home.

These programs are still running. In addition, when new classroom infrastructure such as electronic whiteboards, were wanted by the staff, the same model was used: demonstrations were arranged for parents, the teaching staff put their case, the P&F agreed to purchase this equipment and follow-up demonstrations were given to parents to show how they were being used.

The effect has been to create a quite radical departure from the lay-parent/professional-teacher model of family-school relationships. While the parents respect the professional expertise of the teachers and do not seek to trespass on their professional prerogatives, they have been invited to acquire a level of expertise and involvement themselves, and have a say in the decisions about classroom activity, that goes well beyond simply being asked for money.

Engagement

The high levels of parental engagement at this school – 450 parents turned up to a recent quiz night – is the fruit of more than a decade of pro-active outreach and openness, both symbolic and real, by two successive principals, both of whom are spoken of in the warmest terms by parents and staff.

This continuity of direction has been an important factor in maintaining parental engagement over a long time, particularly through the current sustained period of growth and change. The comment of one parent is illustrative:

One of the great factors is that there has been [this principal] at the helm through this change, because it means there hasn't been someone else come in and go off at a completely different tangent.

The attitude, accessibility and expectations of the Principal were also seen as essential. As another parent put it:

It comes from [the principal] at the initial interview. One of the things he said to me was, we're a team. The parents work with the school. It was a very strong message.

[The principal] and a vice-principal are at every P&F meeting. The door is always open here [in the principal's office]. There is no "I must make an appointment". I can just rock up at the door. That accessibility is a big factor.

Problems are dealt with quickly and not allowed to fester. It comes back to communication.

And we can see the APs and the principal at the drop of a hat.

The bonds that have developed between staff and parents are many. A teacher said:

I have a 20-year-old son who came here in Year 1, and I started my involvement as a parent. The school was very welcoming. It wasn't as if we felt like outsiders. I was then approached by the principal to run the uniform shop and to do some work in the classrooms. I became an assistant and while I was doing that, I did my teaching degree and then started teaching here.

My son got very sick and I was just gob-smacked by the support from everyone here. They cook for you. Everyone pulls together. It's just an amazing place.

A younger teacher said:

Coming to this school was my saving grace. My first year of teaching (in another school) was quite negative with the dynamics of the school and the staff there. Coming here reaffirmed that I wanted to be a teacher and be involved in the community like this.

The Principal spoke of the risks to this cohesiveness arising from the school's rapid growth:

In six years' time we will be a very much bigger school. And it has always been an issue, how we will keep this community together. It's something we talk about all the time. You can easily lose it. We get families who no longer live anywhere near us. The P&F have worked really hard and we all pitch in to make sure that, as we've grown, the place doesn't feel any different as far as community is concerned.

We try to make our school as welcoming as we can. We open our school at 8.15 in the morning by saying, "Welcome everyone". We play music, the doors are open and parents feel that this is a place to come into. We're out there and we welcome parents in.

There are also structures to keep parents involved. There is a P&F representative in every classroom involved in decision-making, in classroom assistance, in social activities and in encouraging other parents to participate. One parent described the effect:

We came from interstate. It was that interaction with other parents, and that homeliness that makes you want to be part of it. And this school's like a big family. You have to pull your weight as part of the family to make the family work well.

Sustainability

Continuity of leadership, a welcoming and open culture exemplified by opening the doors to everyone at 8.15am and having the Principal and staff go out into the yard and actively invite parents inside, the creating and living out of expectations, structural arrangements such as a

P&F rep in every classroom: all these contribute to the sustainability of this partnership over more than eight years.

The teachers who initiated it have gone, but the program lives on and has grown.

Part of it is the way teachers are recruited. The Principal said:

When we employ teachers, one of the main questions we ask is, how do they relate to parents, how do they interact? It's absolutely critical. If we heard that they were uncomfortable having parents in the classroom, we wouldn't think about employing them.

We have some PD to help the teachers deal with challenging parents. That's just a little thing but it's part of the culture.

And the structures of the P&F are also an important factor, as a parent explained:

We have a network we can call on. We set up class reps (from the P&F) and we bring them together and talk about our expectations that they are a two-way conduit, so that information comes from the parent body via them to us (P&F committee) and information comes from us via them to the parent body.

There is also an unwritten expectation from the parents that the class rep will do some pastoral care work. We have a Year 1 teacher leaving, so the class rep is organising a gift and a farewell.

There are also other ways of sustaining interest and involvement:

With the numeracy workshops, even the weekly maths quiz that goes home, the questions are about things we as parents have been involved in, and if you get it right you go into a pool and get a prize. Those little things get the children interacting with the parents and the parents interacting with the school.

Resourcing

The Principal:

We resource it by investing staff time, and we are fortunate in having the expertise here. We use that expertise to train our parents up.

Originally the focus for the workshop was literacy and numeracy. The focus has now changed, and the P&F still resource our classrooms, but on top of that a whole lot of new needs have come as we've grown. There was no air conditioning. And with IT, there were no interactive whiteboards, which is a really important teaching tool. The P&F have taken on both. We wouldn't be able to do it without them.

Teacher:

Yes, but it wasn't just a matter of saying, this is what we need. There were displays, and every morning when the parents came into the classroom the children would do something on the whiteboards and the parents can touch them and do the things. So it is part of their lives as well. It's not just the P&F saying this is what we're doing. It was a consultative thing.

It can be seen that the resourcing is embedded in the way the school is run.

Evaluation and effect on students

Data are kept on the number of workshops run, the number of parents who attend, and how many parent helpers come along to work in the classroom.

Data are also kept on student performance in state and national testing of literacy and numeracy skills as well as from specific programs: Raising Achievement in Schools (RAISe), pre-primary testing (PIPS), and a numeracy equivalent of Reading Recovery.

All data can be compared on a pre-program and post-program basis if required, as well as longitudinally for each cohort of students at different Year levels.

Case 3: An outreach program for multi-cultural parents

The school

This is a Government primary school of 215 students in a high-density south-western suburb of Sydney with about 90% of people coming from non-English-speaking backgrounds, mainly the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific. About 47% of the families are Arabic and about 46% Vietnamese. The next biggest group is from the Pacific Islands, and there is a growing number of families from Africa, along with students from India and Pakistan.

This was a best-practice school in the 2005 study and even though the principal who founded the partnerships program has retired, the program has been maintained and remains healthy.

The project

The project began in 2004 when the Parents' Association was re-formed with an emphasis on including Asian and Middle Eastern parents by holding weekly meetings in Arabic and Vietnamese.

A play group was started, to encourage parents to bring their pre-school children to the school, and a bigger transition-to-school program was set up, beginning in Term 3 of the year before the child started school and continuing through Term 4.

There were bilingual workshops for parents on topics requested by them -- parenting, road safety, bullying – and parent excursions to places such as the Powerhouse Museum so they could experience the kind of educational activities their children were having.

Since then, the project has developed so that the play group has now been handed over from the teaching staff to a group of mothers, who run it. The transition program still operates. The local TAFE has been engaged to come in and run English-language classes for parents, and a number of mother come in each day to help in the school. One prepares healthy lunches for the students; another helps with computer classes, reading and Scripture. The P&C arranged for Halal food to be available in the canteen.

There Arabic and Vietnamese community meetings continue and have developed into networks of parents from these communities.

Engagement

The level of parental engagement at this school has risen greatly in the four years the program has been running. However, this had not come easily. The previous principal had to bring about substantial cultural change in the staffroom to persuade the teaching staff of the benefits of giving parents a voice. She also appointed a staff member to be responsible for making the project work. This staff member is still responsible for the project.

The new principal embraced the parent-empowerment culture. With a long career in special-needs schools, he described himself as “a people person” and said he had always placed a heavy emphasis on community engagement. He also looked for ways of engaging parents on their own terms, and of engaging the wider community.

I get out every morning and afternoon in the yard and talk to the parents. The parents come and sit with the kids until the bell goes and they're here about half an hour before the bell in the afternoon, so I just go out and have a yarn with them.

I learned that Arabic and Asian people don't like to make eye contact, and that there is this “authority figure” attitude. I walk around and say hello and after a while they learn I'm going to say hello regardless. That breaks the ice.

However, cultural barriers are not easily surmounted. Getting a broad range of parents to be active in the P&C has not been achieved, but the school has found other ways to reach out successfully.

Q: Are there parents involved who are not in the P&C?

No. That's the dilemma. The Arabic women, a lot of them have got a tribe of kids. That's the culture. The more worldly among the Muslim community do get involved in the wider world.

Q: Is there some way of reaching out to those people?

I think this program has done that. The Arabic community language teacher has a weekly hour in which she gets on the phone if there's a problem with attendance or fees or the child turning up dirty or something. I'll write down what I want to say and she'll say it. That's developed a really good conduit between the mums and me and the school in general.

A lot of the people in this district are uneducated even in Arabic, so we put stuff in the newsletter in Arabic but they can't read that, so she teaches the kids what she's written.

The Vietnamese community presented different challenges:

They are quite highly educated and they are hothouses for children: paying for tutors after school and at weekends. But the parents disengage from the school unless you make them, and Mrs [a teacher of Asian ethnicity] is very good at that. She'll front them. She'll say, "You must come along and do this. This is what we do at school in Australia." Because the Asian parents will drop their kids off and then go to work, mostly in the piecework clothing industry.

The Arabic women come along to their language session because that is their community session and they bring Thermoses of that very strong coffee, and they really enjoy it. The Vietnamese people – you only get them along once a month and then you have to get them into a meeting that has purpose. They're all looking at their watches and if it goes more than 45 minutes they're gone because they've got to get to work.

Q: So you have to get people here on their own terms?

Yes. I thought the TAFE language program would do that, and it has, to a point. We get about 10 from each language group. So, little steps.

The Principal was also looking for ways to engage the wider community:

There are a lot of older people living around here and I'm looking at getting them in to work with our language teachers as readers or just telling stories to the kids. Every Arabic kid has to do the Arabic language program and every Vietnamese kid has to do Vietnamese. So the older people might just like to tell historical stories, or myths and legends.

The staff member responsible for the project also spoke insightfully about how to engage parents from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and equip them to be involved in the classroom:

We have provided training. That was the whole idea of the workshops. We want the community to help in the classroom, and we realised we needed to provide some training to enable them to feel more confident.

We surveyed the communities about it and we chose our workshops topics based on what they told us. Mostly they wanted to know, how did the children learn? So we told them about the different programs, the early interventions, the early reading skills, how they start learning to count.

We had to run a workshop on [arithmetical] division for the Vietnamese parents because they had learnt to do division very differently and that was an area they wanted to be updated on.

The average number of enrolments [in the workshops] is about 12 to 15, which is pretty good for a small school. Depending on the topic, you might get more from one community or another. For example, when we ran one on accelerated learning, they were predominantly Vietnamese because they push on the academic side for the children.

Being sensitive to cultural differences was also important:

Trying to bring the two communities together has not always been successful. I think it's because of the cultural differences. They started off well, and I thought that when they got to know each other's cultures a bit more, they would be more comfortable. But it didn't turn out that way. So for some workshops we make it combined, for instance one on raising the bilingual child, but otherwise we run separate workshops.

For the parents, the opportunity to be near their children, and to be able to do something to help in their education were two big incentives:

I like to be close to my son, who is now at school, and my daughter is 3. She's around, playing sports with the other kids. She gets to do Art classes, goes to [the assistant principal's] room, does computers. The school's happy to have her here as long as I keep an eye on her.

It's a good idea, that transition program. I really liked it. It teaches the parents things like how to hold the pencil properly so they can help their child at home. I thought I was doing everything right at home, but apparently I wasn't.

I enjoy cooking. And I volunteered so I could make home-cooked meals for my son and he's not eating all these processed foods. And I thought that instead of making it for him only, I'll make it for the whole school. I do Caesar salads for recess, and they are paying attention more. They're not too sleepy or aggressive after recess.

* * *

I love being around my children and it's a small school and I got to know the principal and she was really nice and she helped me get on to the panel for choosing teachers. You do a course and you can be approved to sit on the selection panel. I love being in the classrooms and helping the children.

Sustainability

Having a new principal who embraced the partnership project and the ideals it stood for was obviously crucial. He kept the staff member who is responsible for the program in her position. This staff member had become widely liked, trusted and respected by parents from all ethnic backgrounds. The continuity that came from keeping her in the job was important.

This staff member explained how the project had been sustained:

I timetable myself in for a certain time for the play groups so I can still co-ordinate it, but the play group is now run totally independently by a parent. I just organise the program and make sure the activities and story books are available. So I still plan it, but I then hand it over to her and she runs it.

Being able to engage committed parents who were in turn trusted by their own communities was another important factor in the sustainability of the program. This was especially true of the Arabic community, whose women did not always find it easy to mix in the wider world.

The parents – she’s an Arabic parent – are very happy with her. She is a very charismatic person and she taps into the community very well.

Having programs that met the needs of the parents – the workshops, language classes, the opportunity to be near their children – was another vital factor in this program’s continuity.

The school has been energetic and imaginative in reaching out to parents and telling them what was going on.

When we were organising the kinder transition, we got parents to take flyers around to the doctors’ surgeries, to shopping centres, asking shop owners to put them in their windows.

The play group was the original project that we started with. That was because 60% of the children who were then enrolling in kinder had never been to pre-school. So they came to school with no English, no social skills. And we were trying to promote the number of enrolments.

We started with about 12 parents, and used to run it once a week. Now we are running it twice a week, two hours each, and there are about 20 to 25 parents.

We have some parents who come from way out of our area.

We have kept it running at a social level, sharing cultures, sharing traditions. So we ask them to bring their own food and we share that at the end of each session. That is how we have tried to build the community.

And being responsive and pro-active:

It is important to know what the parents want, because they only come to these sessions if they get something out of it.

So just dialogue, communication, and we have surveys from time to time.

Anything that comes up with curriculum, any initiative we are taking, we always run the workshops immediately.

A parent recognised the importance of the principals in sustaining the project:

The principals have been fantastic. [Previous principal] wanted to make a go of having the community involved, and then [present principal] comes in and he's really community-based and you have to be that sort of person. You have to love community. It is a major thing to have a principal you can go to, communicate with. Imagine having a sour-puss!

She also recognised the need for a small core of committed parents, and in suburbs of economic disadvantage such as this, that was complicated by welfare rules:

I'm trying to get more parents involved. If we get more numbers in here for play group, we can go to the Government and ask for a pre-school and get more people involved.

You need people who want to be around their kids.

It's difficult because we're in a high-unemployment area and you have Centrelink pushing parents to find work.

We have one man who comes to P&C meetings and brings his daughter to play group. If I can grab him, then it'll bring in more men.

Resourcing

The school has continued to resource the staff member's position to ensure the project continues, and also pays for a teacher's aide and a teacher's relief time to run the transition program. Otherwise resources are scarce and some activities, such as the excursions, have had to be cut. The Principal estimated that to continue the project in its original form, with the excursions and child-minding, would cost about \$10,000 extra a year.

Once the funding for [the 2005] program finished, we applied for Departmental funding under FICT, a community program. It was to provide for parent excursions, parent training courses both in English and in social understanding, because the women in particular are very isolated. We didn't get the money, so that made life difficult and we had to find other ways

We didn't do the trip to Sydney, but there was an Arabic art exhibition in the Art Gallery and we have an art teacher here and she got the kids to do art and then we had an excursion for the kids and invited the parents along.

I also organised the TAFE to come in and give free English classes. We have it for Arabic and Vietnamese. We get about 20 to those. We had to organise child-minding and

because we couldn't afford it, one parent a week looks after the little kids for a couple of hours.

Q: How much would you need to resource these activities properly?

We applied for \$2000 for parent trip into Sydney and the training to go with it. For the child-minding we'd need a couple of hundred dollars a week over 40 weeks, so that's \$8000. So probably \$10,000 a year. That's a lot of money to us.

This amount was provided to the school by the Commonwealth as part of the 2005 research project. When that money ran out, the project had to be cut back in the way the Principal described.

One of the parents has ambitions to set up a pre-school alongside the play group, so the children will go from play group to pre-school to school, but this will need more money:

What I envisage for this school, from the play group, is to have a pre-school here, so the play group and the pre-school would be as one.

Q: Are the kids who go to play group better prepared for school than those who don't?

Yes. I saw them yesterday at transition. To be honest, my students had already done the throwing into hoops and the cutting and the drawing and the tracing of the names.

Evaluation and effect on students

The Principal evaluated the play group by the number of parents involved. It was going strongly. Asked about the effects of the play group and transition program, he said he had evidence that the children who came through the play group were doing better on the Year 3 standardised tests than children who had not come through the play group.

He evaluated the language groups by tracking the numbers of parents involved and the numbers who went on to get jobs, where that was their ambition:

Most of the Arabic women aren't concerned about getting jobs because it's not their culture. But the Vietnamese or more worldly Arabic women are coming to get jobs.

The network meetings were evaluated by the numbers attending. The staff member responsible said:

The attendance is like a yo-yo. Network meetings – the Arabic ones have gone from about 5 to about 12 to about 15. Average about 8 each week, and not always the same

ones. We have been able to tap into the new ones. The Vietnamese it's always the same and there are about 10 of them.

Case study 4: Broadening a parent body to include new arrivals

The school

This Catholic primary school serves a lower socio-economic population in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. About 60% of students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and an influx of Sudanese immigrants is increasing the diversity of the school community. Other major ethnic groups are Filipino, Chinese, Indian and Maltese.

The project

The project consisted of rebuilding the entire structure by which parents were involved in school life. For generations there had been a fathers' club and a mothers' club. One of our respondents said her father had been in the father's club. These clubs were fixed in a bygone age: State of Origin Rugby League nights, father-and-son camping trips for the men; social and Mother's Day events for the women.

Mothers and fathers didn't mix at these groups. A single mother had been unable to take her son on the camping trip; immigrant fathers with no knowledge of Rugby League had little incentive to attend State-of-Origin nights. Many women felt excluded from the social events. The clubs' focus was on fund-raising. This further excluded the many families who had limited means. Parents now active in the school tell how it was:

The Mothers' and Fathers' Club had been around for a long time. My father was a member. It was old-fashioned. It didn't change with the times.

* * *

I'm from an Asian background. I've been at the school 10 years and it's taken me this long to feel a part of the family because of the way it was. And there were very few Asians when I started. I can see where the Sudanese are coming from.

A his and hers thing. You never came together as mums and dads.

Engagement

There is a core of parents who now run the project. A staff member of more than 20 years' standing, whose main role was pastoral care and outreach to parents, was let go by the school for financial reasons. Yet her commitment is such that she still is involved unofficially in the background and in touch with the parents, who hope that one day she will come back.

The re-structuring of the parent groups started with morning teas for parents at the pre-school. Mothers and fathers come every Wednesday, and between 15 and 25 families turn up. Food has been a powerful agent in drawing people together. So has been the shifting of the focus away from fund-raising, with a new focus on providing information to parents:

It took 12 months to build up to the change. We had fathers coming who hadn't been involved in the fathers' club.

We started a morning tea with parents at the pre-school. We started out fortnightly and now it's every Wednesday. We provide activities and craft and singing and nursery rhymes, stories and a play time. It's got the parents involved with the children and children involved with each other.

There isn't a lot of money in this area. We have reduced the amount of fund-raising so people don't feel they have their hands in their pockets all the time.

We've had a lot of mums come to that who would never go to any mothers' club meeting. We've had the Sudanese mothers turning up.

Food is a great thing. We had a family fun day and the different communities all turned up with food. There was a whole table-full. We had over 700 people.

We put as much information out in the newsletter as we possibly could. Sometimes we take up a whole page making sure parents know anything and everything that's going on.

Speaking of the loss of the community liaison staff member, one parent said:

[Former staff member] would wander around among the parents in the afternoon and she would say, we're having this, come, come.

Q: She's gone. Have you taken it up?

Yes, through the morning teas and through our communications. No one could replace [staff member]. She was wonderful. We do miss her. I think in time that person will be back.

Q: To do that community liaison work?

Yes. It's very important. You need someone who is linked to the school, not a parent but very much in touch with the parents. You can speak freely about certain things. When my eldest son started, I was going through a very horrible divorce and she was wonderful in speaking not only to me but to my ex-husband.

If I had problems like that, I wouldn't talk to a teacher, but to [staff member] I would talk because she is not involved with the children.

The Principal was supportive of the partnership ideal and specifically wanted to build up the involvement of parents in the classroom through a system of tutors.

The driving force is to ensure that everything we do is supporting our children's needs, and we can't do that unless we have the active partnership of our parent community.

We have to build up the capacity of our parents as reading tutors, working in the library, looking at child protection.

We are not going to build stronger literacy and numeracy in this school until we have stronger partnerships with our families in the whole learning process.

Transparency with the school community is paramount. We have let our community know exactly where we are at with need, with results, with changes in pedagogy. We have shared with our parents every step of the way our professional development in English and maths particularly: newsletter, blogsite, information evenings, public speaking.

He and his deputy had tried to assist the parent leaders by modelling ways of managing people, creating targets and building simple frameworks of operation.

Sustainability

The project has been sustained by a core group of parents who were connecting into several of the ethnic communities, especially the Asian communities, and by the behind-the-scenes assistance of the former staff member, whose active involvement, support and counsel were seen by the parents as indispensable.

The broadening of the activities to draw in a much wider range of people had added to sustainability, and old cliques had been broken down. The fathers' club still met, but at the workingmen's club, not the school.

The work that [the former staff member] has done – and still does – is amazing. She helps them adapt by taking them to medical appointments, showing them how to shop, showing them what a coffee and a sandwich is over lunch, inviting them into her home. She continues that work even though she is no longer here.

* * *

Over the past three years we have tried to build a rapport with the Sudanese families and the leaders of their community by having a get-together during the year and putting on a barbecue. They loved it. They got to tell their stories. We had a translator.

They could express their concerns and their history and how they got over here. You can see now that they're not as timid and stand-offish.

* * *

And a problem in the past was that the call wasn't put out to make people feel they are a part of the community. It was just left to a particular group or clique. That's been a very hard thing to change.

Having informal structures also makes it less intimidating and more attractive.

We didn't have committees and sub-committees. People won't come to meetings. I won't come to meetings.

Resourcing

The Principal's relinquishing of the community liaison staff member had been forced by a need to spend money on other things.

She was funded through the strategic leadership funding by previous principals. She was a parent liaison person. So on behalf of the school community she would liaise with parent groups and she would go out and visit families who were struggling. She would be there for our families from Africa. She would be there for families who were facing economic strife and family breakdown.

It was a very difficult decision not to continue her role here. If I could afford a person to support families, and particularly women, I would.

Q: What would it cost to employ such a person?

In the region of \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. It was my decision to end it and it was a very difficult one and it was basically balanced against greater needs. At that stage there were other areas, particularly in student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy, that were not being met and I needed to take that limited budget.

Q: Aside from employing a parent liaison person, what other resourcing, if any, would you want?

Funding to release teachers to act as mentors to parents who work as classroom tutors.

Q: How many parent tutors are there?

In the 30s. I'd like around 75.

The parents were also aware of the need for more funds if the project was to flourish.

We have a lot of businesses in our school and we want people to know that these services are available through the school, so we have put out a simple business directory. We want to do it better but we need funds.

Evaluation and effects on students

Much of the evaluation by parents was based on the numbers and range of parents who attend various activities, the number of people who put in prizes and the “feel” of the community after these events. All these indicators were positive, and as a result the school believed that the project was attaining its goals.

The parents planned to do a survey to find out parents’ attitudes, and compare the results with those from a previous survey.

The Principle gave as an example of increased involvement the turn-up to a K to 2 athletics day the previous week:

We had just a simple in-house Olympics celebration day and I couldn’t believe the number of parents who came along. So much so that I had to go and get sound systems. We just weren’t ready for any numbers.

So it’s number and breadth of different people coming to a variety of occasions. It has greatly increased.

Case study 5: School as a centre for the wider community

The school

This government primary school serves a community on the northern fringe of Melbourne with the highest unemployment rate in the metropolitan area, where 92% of families receive the education maintenance allowance and 62% of students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

When the present principal arrived seven years ago, he found relations between the school and parents to be “a disaster”. Parents were wandering the corridors, breaking in on lessons, yelling at other people’s children and yelling at him. There was a fractious relationship between parents and the front office, and no proper arrangements for parents to interact with the school on a constructive footing at all. Teachers regarded the staff room as their safe haven from all this.

On the positive side, the school had an Early Learning Centre where parents were constructively engaged, and had been for years. However, the benefits did not transfer across to the school itself when those children started school.

The project

The project is multi-faceted. To try to emulate the success of the Early Learning Centre, the school opened its doors to parents on a daily and informal basis so they had somewhere to come, socialise with each other, and talk to the staff. A breakfast program was established, and out of that program came a much wider engagement with the community through a State Government-sponsored Neighbourhood Renewal program. The school became the locus of this renewal program and so was at the heart of a network of partnerships reaching well beyond the school gates.

Engagement

The Principal began by changing the culture of parent-staff relations in the school. One of the first things he did was to open the staff room to parents in the morning before school started.

He took the “staff room” sign off the door and invited parents in to have a cup of tea and read the paper:

There was a lot of angst about that among the staff. I told them I wanted parents in the school. I wanted them to feel welcome. A couple of staff were really angry at me, that the parents were going to “my safe area”.

He and his assistant principal made a point of going in there and striking up conversations with the parents. The idea was to engage them on whatever topics they wanted – what had happened at the weekend, what was in the papers – and so get them used to seeing the staff as human beings with whom they could have an ordinary conversation. In this way, parents who had an issue they wanted to raise could do so in a civilised way.

It wasn't all roses. The principal had to speak privately to one very angry man whose swearing was offensive, and whose family subsequently left the school. But on the whole he regarded it as a success. There was a core of parents there every morning, but a bigger number who came irregularly. Even getting them to leave their houses and socialise was a challenge:

Some of them can't read. They feel quite inadequate in lots of ways, and it's a matter of getting their self-esteem up. A huge number of our parents are stuck in their homes. They've got very little to do in their lives.

The school tried having a group called “Good Parenting”. This was not a success:

Not one of the parents from here would go. They saw it as derogatory. The middle class came from other areas, but our parents didn't.

They do need help to be good parents, but you have to be careful. We had a child faint in the pool last week because she hadn't had breakfast or had anything to drink.

The school enlisted the help of the Melbourne City Mission to start a breakfast club, and eventually the parents took over the running of it. The effect on these parents' capacity and self-confidence was dramatic:

The breakfast club ones, who work for the Melbourne City Mission, they've changed dramatically. One of our fathers, six children, you wouldn't have seen him here. If he was here, he was very quiet. Now he runs so many different things. He's been in to talk to the Premier and things like that to talk about what we need in the area.

So he's an advocate for the school and for Neighbourhood Renewal. It's amazing.

Neighbourhood Renewal was a State Government program to re-build communities that were especially deprived. It entailed forming a group of residents who would work with government agencies to rejuvenate the community, make it safer, give it facilities it was lacking, and plan for the future.

The trouble was, the Neighbourhood Renewal team could not at first find a group of residents on which to base the program. There was no civic infrastructure. They went to the local shopping centre but found nothing. They tried knocking on doors to see if they could find some group with whom they could start. Eventually they turned up at the school's Early Learning Centre, and found the 30 or so parents who were involved there. And in what used to be the school's staff room they found 20 more. Suddenly they had a core of residents on which they could build the neighbourhood renewal project.

The Neighbourhood Renewal project brought considerable benefits to the parents. Some were employed to do neighbourhood surveys; others were employed by the City Mission to run the breakfast program at the school. This required them to do a food-handling course. Others were on a range of working parties making decisions about their neighbourhood: housing, health, well-being, safety, the environment, employment and learning. The relevant government agencies sit in on the meetings and develop plans of action with them.

At the school, in addition to the Early Learning Centre and the breakfast program, a multicultural garden was established where parents grow a wider range of vegetables. This had had some effect on dietary habits in the home. The school runs a "Fruit Friday" and tries to arrange for the children to have a piece of fruit every day.

What has any of this to do with education? The following was the response to this question from the woman who runs the Early Learning Centre:

It is a shift in how you see your core business. If you look carefully at your approach to education, and if it's the universal approach that you take, and you see the child in the context of its community and see how you develop the child's education in that context, you must involve the community.

It's not just education of the child but education of the family as well. And by allowing us to put the breakfast club into the Early Learning Centre, the City Mission brought

nourishment to the children – they were getting breakfast – but there was another nourishment taking place. That is, the child is feeling good about themselves.

Sustainability

At the time the researchers visited the school, the project was relatively new and the considerable professional involvement by a range of government agencies meant that sustainability was as much in the hands of the State Government as anyone. With the school as the hub of the Neighbourhood Renewal project, and the school having committed itself to making provision for community activities in the long term, there was a degree of structural permanence that is unusual.

However, sustainability of involvement by parents is a different matter, and here there were some interesting signs. One was that the example of a parent being involved in the life of the school and the community was now being followed by her child. Another was the growth in parent participation and sense of ownership.

Q: [Breakfast worker now employed by the City Mission] told me this morning that the example of her being involved is now rubbing off on the daughter, who is putting her hand up and volunteering?

She was one of the four girls who presented at the assembly you saw this morning.

Q: So is there a kind of inter-generational transference?

Absolutely. What [the Early Learning Centre] has created is leadership by parents. So they start off on the outside of the door thinking I don't know what's going on in there. This is not for me. Then someone persuades them to come in and then within 12 months they're volunteering in the program.

So that building of the idea that I have a place here, that basic self-belief that I'm doing something worthwhile.

And they are bringing their younger children. The most important change over the past five years is the partnerships. It has enabled us to enhance those programs. Our volunteers have now been trained as facilitators. One has been trained as a kinder assistant.

We try to let Mum have a real sense that she has control in that program. The parents sit in on our de-brief, and we try to say positive things about the children: Did you see where . . .? Look how far . . . Then Mum is taking away that information informally.

Quite often now, parents are asking to sit in on the de-brief because they've noticed something.

So we are starting to develop the next group of facilitators by identifying those parents who want to be involved.

We've grown from a play group that was lucky to get five or six parents coming regularly to now having 34.

Resourcing

The school made its premises available and continued to finance the Early Learning Centre and the position of a parent liaison officer. The City Mission financed the breakfast program, and the State Government put four people into the Neighbourhood Renewal program. Even so, the pressure on the school's funds is significant, as the Principal explained:

It's difficult. I'm in deficit at the moment, I'll be honest. The school does what it can: [parent liaison person's] role, and another teacher aide who works in the Early Learning Centre. You have to put resources there. You get the benefits in the long term.

It takes a good 5% of the school budget. And that room could have been a library or a science centre. But we've kept this commitment. We pay for the cleaning, the lights, the heating.

A staff member added:

And the cost of new materials. I'm applying madly for grants. And this is the problem: it is not seen as part of the school's budget, so we have to look outside.

One of the benefits of being in a Neighbourhood Renewal program, with Communities for Children and Best Start programs, is that those names behind a grant application carry a bit of weight. We've had a bit of success with grants.

Literally we have put together \$100 from five different sources [to make up \$500] to do something.

The school was in the throes of being amalgamated with another local primary school and new buildings were being planned. There was a long bureaucratic tug-of-war over what buildings should be funded as part of this work. The Principal and staff explained:

When the new school was being designed, part of it was for community spaces within the school. That was very hard-fought, and it's still not won.

We pushed and pushed, but the funding levels the Department give you are at the same levels as for any new school. So we did something [for the community] and we had to take away from somewhere else.

And we put the Early Learning Centre in, and it was in and out and in and out, and we only just got the agreement last week that it can be in.

That was a huge victory.

Evaluation

This case has been subject to external and independent evaluation, the results of which have been published by the researchers who carried it out. Like the present research, it was qualitative, being based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation methods. It described the project as “a model for tackling disadvantage and promoting participation in pre-school education”.⁴

From personal experience the Principal could see a difference:

I haven't had a parent come up and yell at me for three years. But I used to. It was a disaster here. So make a difference early, get them involved, make them feel welcome, talk to them as an equal, respectfully, and you get something.

Even things like the breakfast club: kids must be happier if they've got food in their stomach.

A staff member added:

The change among the teaching staff has been huge. One of the younger teachers said to me recently, “I am developing my own links with the community”. She is developing the safety program. She's gone out and got the fire brigade involved. Things are only sustainable if others take ownership, and that's what's happening.

And the development of those parents: 20 graduated through the Leadership Matters program and we had a certificate night. They were so proud of themselves.

There had been noticeable changes in parent behaviour, and consequential benefits to the children:

One of the fathers cycles up here with his boy every morning for breakfast and he told me: “I no longer have to yell at him to get out the door. So we can have breakfast together and say goodbye properly”.

So the child will go into the classroom without the anger issues. So he's ready to learn in lots of other ways.

⁴ Warr, D., *op. cit.*

And absenteeism is a huge issue in this school. We've been able to bring the numbers down from the "very high-needs" group. These children were missing huge numbers of days – they were missing a year of their schooling. They are now in the "irregular" group.

Why does Mum keep the child away? "I needed help with the little ones today. I was feeling lonely." We have to address that. We have to make some changes as to how Mum is feeling, where she can go, her self-esteem, so that the child is coming to school.

The parent liaison officer said:

The research is starting to show that the change in parents' behaviour does have a very direct impact on children's educational results.

We've got a parent survey all the principals do with their Prep cohort, and an evaluation of the Early Learning Centre program. From that we've got changes in parents' behaviour that were statistically significant: they had social connections, they knew people in their neighbourhood, whereas they didn't before, and their children knew people, and there was a huge improvement in that.

The idea is to be able to achieve measurable results for the children. The exciting thing with the Best Start funding is we're one of the few sites that got results of significance in the first three years.

Case study 6: Early Learning Centre and Community Centre

The school

This government primary school of 240 students is located in an area of widespread economic disadvantage west of Hobart, where unemployment is high and where there is a high incidence of single-parent families. The population is aging and the enrolments have been declining gradually for a decade, despite the strong community engagement that has resulted from the partnerships projects over that whole period.

This was a best-practice school in the 2005 research. The partnerships projects were already well-established by that time, and have continued to grow and expand since. The Early Learning Centre has been a cornerstone of this work, and the school's success in this area was probably a factor in its becoming a hub for a birth-to-four program called *Launch Into Learning*.

The project

This project has grown organically with the needs of the families and the community. It started when two teachers in the pre-Kinder program and the early years of primary heard parents say they wanted to bring their toddlers into the school. The parents were also saying that they were lonely and isolated. Some could not afford the bus fare to the shopping centre, which had been cut off from them by a motorway.

At this time the Principal was looking for ways of re-connecting with the community after a period in which the two had become estranged, and he supported the idea from the two teachers that an early learning centre, for children from birth to four, should be set up in some spare rooms in the school. He also supported a parallel idea for establishing a community room in the school where the parents could meet and socialise and have somewhere to go outside the four walls of their homes.

An experienced kindergarten teacher was enlisted to help set up the Early Learning Centre, and the two teachers worked with a group of parents to set up the Parent and Community Centre. These two centres were in adjacent rooms with a peep-hole in the inter-connecting door so parents could look through and see how their toddlers were getting on.

Gradually the teachers relinquished control of the Parent and Community Centre to the parents, and for many years now they have run a series of courses in areas such as computer skills. But perhaps most importantly it became a place of friendship and support. More recently the parents established a fresh food co-op not only for themselves but for the wider community, especially older people who have trouble getting around.

Engagement

The way the food co-op came about, as described by the Principal, illustrates how this school has listened and responded to people's needs, and so engaged them in partnership:

They [the parents] have a breakfast meeting and plan what they're going to do. One of the most exciting initiatives over the past couple of years has been the fresh food co-op. They were discussing how difficult it is to make ends meet, and how difficult it is to buy fresh fruit and vegetables for their kids, and they then said, what about if we all threw in and we go to the big fruit and vegetable wholesaler and we buy seasonal things in bulk, we'll get them more cheaply, bring them back here to the school, and then distribute them into smaller boxes. Each box costs \$10 and families walk away with this \$10 box [a large overflowing box].

We're looking now to move beyond the school – older people who find it hard to get around. If they live nearby they can get their box delivered. The ladies who run it here cut it all up, wrap it up, put it in the boxes. They're up to about 25 families now. We got some sponsorship from the Smith Family, who have started a partnership within this area. So we went to the Smith Family and asked if they would think about kicking it off for us. We needed a little bit of a float to get the thing underway, and they did that.

Now the thing pays for itself. There's no profit in it but they cover the costs.

The *Launch Into Learning* program has also created linkages with the wider community that have the potential to increase the reach of the food co-op :

Through the Launching Into Learning program, we go to a regular meeting of the local council where all of the agencies – health, child care, education, disability services, family support services – come together, and each group shares where they're at. There was quite a lot of interest in this [the food co-op] from some of the other agencies.

They asked us whether we had thought about expanding beyond the school. For the moment, our school will run it for the school community and maybe for the people who live in close proximity, but the model could be picked up and run elsewhere.

[Two staff members] got the ball rolling, and now two mums have taken it over.

This shows how partnerships in one area can lead to possible partnerships in another.

Spontaneity seems to be important:

We've run a lot of programs: computer support for older people; parents – “your kids are well ahead of you now. Here's an opportunity to know exactly what they're doing.” We've run programs on how to work the email, the internet, and other basic functions like word-processing.

There are a lot of spontaneous things that happen in addition to the actual programs. The room is used almost constantly.

It's a bonus for the children to be involved and they get to use all the things, but the really good stuff happens between the teachers and the parents, so that they take the things home and they're doing it seven days a week, not just for the two hours or so that they're here. So they learn how to prepare their children for school: do the rhymes and the singing, and how to read a book. All those sorts of things. And many of them had no idea. One dad said, “I didn't ever think about reading my kid a book.”

There are things the child and the parent have to do together and bring back next time -- a bit of homework, if you like. It's a fantastic program. We won't see the benefits for a few years yet, but already some things have happened. My kindergarten development check lists and my Prep results on national and state-wide testing are improving because they come to school ready.

Being responsive to parents' needs has also been critical:

There are four programs here: pre-kinder, toddler groups from birth to three, there is an 18-month group, really young mothers bringing along little tiny babies.

The really young ones [mothers] have common needs: they are worried about feeding patterns and sleeping patterns, so they wanted to meet as a separate group. The other toddler groups had three-year-olds racing around, so the groups formed themselves.

So my co-ordinator said, “Okay, we'll form a group for them [the mothers with 18-month-old babies].” It's a lovely group of really young mums all networking and solving each other's problems, which is terrific.

Sustainability

One of the founding teachers has retired, yet the program has continued and expanded. The retired teacher remains involved as a volunteer. The other founding teacher is still involved.

Asked what was the key to sustainability, the Principal replied:

The staff are the key. Also the principal needs to be supportive and provides the things that you need for what you want for your school and school community.

You can't do it without the support of the principal.

That sets it up for really good people to come in and say, "Here is an environment where I can do what I want. I've got these wonderful ideas, and here I'm allowed to do them".

Being prepared to make a sacrifice was also important:

There were some issues of funding, and we put some pressure on the goodwill of the other teachers, because they lost access to different things. The centre we could have used for some other purpose. We could have used it as a room for kids to do drama or an art room.

The other [teachers] said, "We see the value in this [the parent project] and so we're happy to give that space and dedicate it to the community centre.

And they have to see that I'm releasing people to do things. If I took the supervision for the class, they see me as down there teaching [a] class while the teacher is running the community group.

The teaching staff could see clear benefits:

It's a two-way thing. The parents get to know the staff members much better. They see them, they bump into them, they talk to them, so across the board the relationships between the parents and the whole staff are enhanced by these programs.

So they didn't take much convincing that this was a good thing.

And the attitude and enthusiasm of the staff directly involved in the project created an atmosphere that was positive, trusting and friendly:

And [the two staff involved] were zealots for the cause. They were bubbly and effervescent. You could see the satisfaction they were getting out of it.

And they had a lot of credibility with the parents. They were really skilful in the way they managed the group. Nobody felt that they were coming to a "parenting" course. We're not here to tell you to be a better parent or show you how to be a better parent because we are "experts" at it. The fact that [one teacher] was a single mum bringing up a teenage daughter pretty much on her own – they could identify with that.

And [the other teacher] had had children and they were grown up, and there was something about the wisdom and the way she went about it, never judging, always there. [The teachers] did a lot of listening. Often it was just being there.

And then it wasn't just about the crises in their lives, but how can we help other people? People would be taking each other shopping or looking after their kids and avoiding some of the isolation. It's a long walk to [the two nearest shopping centres]. And it's an expensive bus ride if you're struggling.

Resourcing

The school had benefited from the injection of \$40,000 for the *Launch Into Learning* program, but if that money were taken away, the school would simply revert to a basic set of programs of the kind that had started the whole partnerships project. The Principal spoke of the complications involved in getting money from government agencies:

If you're a brilliant writer these days, you do really well, because you have to write a submission for everything. There are a lot of hoops to jump through; a lot of paperwork.

There's a lack of trust among the people who hold the cash towards the people on the ground running the programs.

I think there's a fear that if I give every school this much money to run it, some will do a fantastic job but there are some others who will just buy furniture or not use it for what it was intended.

Q: Say the Government hadn't introduced this [Launch Into Learning] program: what sort of resourcing would you need to keep this going?

You can sustain it as we did before: by people giving up their own time. But both of them were class teachers, so if I bring them off class, someone has to look after the children, so it's either me or I put in a relief teacher. And that's about \$300 a day.

If the Government said, "We're pulling the plug on this", we'd probably go back to what we were doing before: running one pre-kinder group part of the year, and then finding ways to release [the two teachers].

So there are lots of challenges in keeping it going. Whereas, if you've got the funding, you can say, "Okay, every Friday this is going to operate." The funding sets you up to do it in a co-ordinated way, so it's not ad hoc, and not flogging your willing horses.

There also can be a multiplier effect, exemplified by the retired teacher who continues to come back as a volunteer.

People get really attached to the community and the school. She's a perfect case.

Evaluation and the effects on students

The Principal spoke of the difficulty of getting money for this kind of work because of the difficulty in measuring the effect on the children, yet the connections between parent engagement, capability and well-being and student performance were clear to him. He had spoken already of how his kindergarten check lists and Prep results on national and state-wide testing had improved because the children were coming to school ready.

Q: What connections, if any, do you think there are between what happens to those parents and their kids' learning outcomes? Or is that too tenuous a connection?

No I don't think it is. The parents in those groups are much more aware of what's going on in the school. As far as the academic development goes: the link there is in how they feel about the school. Is there someone at the school they can go and ask for help if they daughter or son is struggling a bit or having a problem in the classroom.

He spoke of the effect on parents' self-confidence and how this enhanced the communication between home and school:

One of the ones running the food co-op, it took her two years to look at me to say hello. So you can see a lot of change.

The atmosphere, the trust that is created, and over time build up people's confidence. They come because they know that's it's a friendly place. For a lot of them, their school lives were not particularly positive. So it does take a while. Some of them had trouble making eye contact with the principal. So you've almost got to stop them and say hello. Now I have conversations with them.

Now, they might then ask the teacher of the child what's going on. So there are those connections between the parents and the teachers. You've got a good conduit.

So it's difficult to tie down and say, "That's really the difference, that's what's caused the difference in that assessment", but if kids are self-confident because mum's happy about school, he comes to school a different kid from the one who's had an argument because mum is reticent about coming into school to deal with something.

Q: What do you say to people who say I just want to see the literacy and numeracy outcomes?

My usual response is that schools are all about relationships. The best teaching and learning is done when the kids like and trust their teachers.

You can't measure this stuff. That is the problem. A lot of the stuff we are reporting – the NAPLAN tests – they are not there to help us. This is a national assessment program. Nothing, absolutely nothing in that testing tells us things that my teachers don't already know. And nothing in that testing program makes my teachers teach better.

Things that [the bureaucrats] get beaten up about – kids failing the benchmarks – are difficult to tie back to how people feel about school and the relationships that are going on within the school.

It's really, really difficult to sell this sort of stuff. Anecdotes and stories and case studies show the value.

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

RESEARCHERS' INTERVIEW OUTLINES

There are **four** broad areas of inquiry:

- How to **engage** parents
- How to **sustain** the program
- How to **resource** the program
- How to **measure participation** and **effects**

THE PRINCIPAL

We should ask the principal to first of all describe the current partnership project, and its objectives. (If the school was in the 2005 study, ask how, if at all, the project or objectives have changed since then.)

We should then ask a series of questions under each of the four broad areas of inquiry.

Engagement

- How did you go about engaging parents in the first place?
- How representative of the parent population do you think the parents who are engaged in this program are?
- Have you been able to engage the previously disengaged?
- If so, how and to what extent?
- If not, what if anything have you tried or might you try?
- Has the project reached beyond the parents to the wider community?
- (If so) How has that happened and what have been the effects?
- (If not) Are there other ways in which the school is in partnership with the wider community?
- How does this concept of community partnerships sit with your plans for the school?

Sustainability

- How long has the program been running?
- Why was it set up in the first place?
- Are those reasons still relevant?
- Are there new reasons for keeping it going?
- Is it growing, stable or shrinking?
- Why?
- Generally speaking, what are the critical ingredients in sustaining a program like this?

Resourcing

- What resources does the program take?
- Do you pay for these out of the normal budget or do you need to get money from outside the budget?
- What do you spend it on mainly?

Is the resourcing sustainable? If not, what if anything can the school do about it?

Measuring

Participation

Does anyone keep any records or data which show the extent of parental participation? If so, can you share them with us?

What do you think would be reasonable data to collect to show the level of parental participation? By “reasonable” I mean that it would measure something real without putting too much of a burden on people. (Probe: Number of parents involved; use of facilities; frequency of activities; parent survey.)

Would you like any help to do this?

Effects

Looking at your objectives, do you have any data showing whether the program is meeting its objectives? If so, can you share them with us?

What do you think would be reasonable data to collect to show these effects?

Would you like any help to do this?

In broad terms, what have been the outcomes:

For the school
For families
For students

What, if anything, has the project taught the parents and school about how parental involvement affects the outcomes for students?

What effect, if any, do you think it has had on the school culture?

If another school principal asked for your advice about establishing a family-school partnership, what would be the main advice you would give?

THE PERSON WHO HAS HAD CARRIAGE OF THE PROJECT

If the principal has been unable to answer any of the questions, put them to this person.

Also ask this person:

How is the whole thing going? (probe on logistics, timing, costs, day-to-day working with the parent representatives, communicating with, and engaging, parents.

What lessons were learnt about how to make family-school partnerships work?

And what about how to sustain them?

What feedback have you received from the principal, other staff, the parents, the students? (In particular probe for any data on participation and effects.

What effect, if any, do you think it has had on the school culture?

If you were doing it again, what, if anything, would you do differently?

If staff at another school asked for your advice about establishing a family-school partnership, what would be the main advice you would give?

PARENT REPRESENTATIVES

If the principal and the person with carriage of the project have not been able to answer any of the questions about sustainability, resources and effects, ask the parents.

Also ask them:

How did you get involved?

Why did you get involved?

What was it that really motivated you?

How does it link with other parents who are not directly involved?

What did you do to draw parents into the project, especially parents who don't usually participate in school activities? What, if anything, did you learn about what works and what does not work in this regard?

What sustains it? What are the really important factors here?

What feedback have you received from the principal, staff, other parents, the students?

What is the resourcing like? Is it adequate?

How is the whole thing going? Probe on logistics, timing, costs, day-to-day working with the school leadership, communicating with other parents.

What effect, if any, do you think it has had on the well-being of students?

What, if anything, has the project taught the parents and school about how parental involvement affects the outcomes for students?

What effect, if any, do you think it has had on the school culture?

What lessons have been learnt about how to make family-school partnerships work?

If you were doing it again, what if anything would you do differently?

As far as you know, does the school plan to further embed the school-family partnerships concept? Is there pressure from parents to continue with this project or to have some other initiative taken to build and sustain partnerships?

If parents at another school asked for your advice about establishing a family-school partnership, what would be the main advice you would give?

What are the essential characteristics of a good partnership between family and school?