

## Parents as partners in Indigenous children's learning



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Partnerships  
Bureau

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## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Methodology.....	6
Reflections on the context of this study .....	10
Findings .....	13
The foundation: belief, conviction and school culture .....	13
The decisive factor: leadership .....	15
Overcoming barriers .....	17
Core practices in making partnerships real.....	19
The concept of equal treatment .....	21
Some matters concerning teacher training .....	22
The importance of symbolism.....	23
Respectfulness and manner of speech.....	24
Connections between the 2006 findings and the current research .....	25
Case studies .....	27
Case A.....	27
Case B .....	31
Case C .....	36
Case D.....	41
Case E .....	45
Case F.....	50
Case G.....	54
Case H.....	59
Next steps .....	63
Conclusion.....	69
Bibliography .....	70
Appendix 1: Research Instruments.....	72
Interview schedule: principals and school leadership .....	72
Elements of best practice found in 2005-2006 family-school partnerships research .....	73
Interview schedule: school staff who were involved directly in the initiative .....	74
Interview schedule: parents.....	75

## Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau in December 2011. The objective was to document, analyse and report on existing innovative and effective partnerships between schools and Indigenous, most particularly, Aboriginal families and communities.

The intended outcomes were:

- Acknowledgement, understanding and celebration of successful Indigenous family-school and community partnerships.
- Provision of documented accounts of successful partnerships to inform and encourage similar partnerships.
- Promotion of effective strategies to foster family-school and community partnerships across all schools regardless of sector or socio-economic and cultural conditions.

There is a substantial body of research indicating that parental engagement in the education of their children has a strongly positive effect on student outcomes. A meta-analysis by Henderson & Berla (1994) of 66 publications on this topic notes that the most accurate predictor of student achievement is the extent to which the family is involved in the student's education, and that the family's contribution remains critical from the earliest years of childhood to the end of secondary schooling. Henderson is blunt:

*The evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school.*

Several studies have shown the effects of parental engagement on specific aspects of a child's education, including attendance (Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979), classroom behaviour and rate-of-return of homework (Dougherty & Dougherty, 1977; Ayllon, Garber & Pisor, 1975). These studies are summarised in a meta-analysis by Hess & Holloway (1984).

There is further evidence that partnerships between families, schools and communities are particularly valuable in improving student outcomes.

A landmark study by Coleman *et al* (1966) of the effectiveness of schools in meeting the needs of children, concluded that the school's effects were marginal when compared with the substantive effects of family and community. Jencks *et al* (1972) reached a similar conclusion: that the characteristics of a school's output largely depend on a single input, namely the characteristics of the entering children. These characteristics are largely the product of what the child has already experienced at home and in the community. Biddulph *et al* (2003) identified social networks as important in providing opportunities for children's further learning, and in providing support to parents as they endeavour to improve their children's achievement. They noted that genuine home/school collaboration could also lift children's achievements significantly.

Australian research on the subject of family-school and community partnerships has been conducted by Muller (2006, 2009). Where appropriate, connections are made in this report between this work and those earlier studies.

The current research project was premised on the idea that people learn best from success stories. If success in developing effective family, school and community partnerships could be demonstrated in a wide variety of settings, then other schools whose settings might in some respects be similar to one or other of the schools in the study might be inspired to emulate them.

A matter of cultural sensitivity: The researchers inquired at each school whether Aboriginal people there preferred the term "Indigenous" or "Aboriginal" or some other name. In some places, the term "Indigenous" was deprecated because it was associated with plant or animal life. In all places, the term "Aboriginal" was acceptable, and so that is the term primarily adopted for this report. Where Torres Strait Islanders are referred to, the term Torres Strait Islanders is used.

## Methodology

Qualitative methods in the form of depth interviews, in person and by telephone, were adopted for this research. The rationale for this approach was as follows.

First, the research questions were broad and multi-faceted. They may be expressed thus:

- What are the critical elements that go into developing successful partnerships between schools and Aboriginal families and communities?
- Why did the school embark on this work?
- How have these critical elements been put into practice in a range of settings?
- What outcomes have resulted, looked at from the perspectives of the school, the family and the community?

Such questions are not amenable, at least in the first instance, to quantitative measurement. If quantification were required – which we do not think it is in this case – these questions would yield hypotheses that could be subjected to quantitative testing. Moreover, it was the researchers' view that such a complex, subtle and many-faceted issue was best approached using methods which allow in-depth exploration not just of what is being done or how much is being done, but why and how it is being done.

Second the objective of the research was to learn from first-hand experience, rather than to measure. This was not an evaluation but an exploration. The research design was premised on the established pedagogical principle that people learn best from success stories.

To that end, nine schools across Australia were identified by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau as being reputed places where successful partnerships had been developed with Aboriginal families and communities. The researchers used this list as a starting point. Each school was contacted and asked about their work in this field. The objective of the research was explained, and they were asked whether in fact they considered themselves to be places whose experiences would contribute to the fulfilment of the research objective.

Most of the schools acknowledged that they did have experiences they thought might be useful to share with others. Two schools responded that while they had done some work in the past which might contribute to the research, circumstances had changed and they did not feel in a position to contribute at this stage. However, in each case, they referred the researchers to other schools in the locality where they said good work was being done.

In one jurisdiction, the researchers were referred by the Bureau to a state Aboriginal education organisation, and it was this organisation that identified the schools in that jurisdiction. The researchers are most grateful for this advice.

Two schools on the original list declined to participate in the research, not because they objected to it but because they were too busy with other matters. Efforts were made over a period of weeks to replace these schools. In the event, one replacement was secured. Consequently, the findings are based on visits to eight sites, not nine as originally intended.

Each of the eight sites was visited by the researchers, typically for one day and in one case over two days. In each place, interviews were conducted with the principal, staff who had particular roles in, or responsibilities for, the partnership endeavour, class teachers, parents, grandparents or carers, and in most places with community elders. At one site, where the work was being done by a network of schools and other organisations, interviews were obtained from a wider range, including the local council, a university and representatives of State and Federal education departments.

A large majority of these interviews were conducted in person, and in cases where the parents or carers lived remotely, they were conducted by telephone.

Across the eight sites, 60 interviews were conducted, all but four in person. The interviews were audio-recorded with the prior consent of the respondents, on the basis that neither the respondents, schools nor communities would be identified. The fieldwork was conducted between 29 March and 29 May, 2012. Basic details of the schools, de-identified, are set out in Table 1.

**Table 1: The sites visited**

LOCATION	CASE	SECTOR	LEVEL
Metropolitan	A	Catholic	Secondary
Metropolitan	B	Government	Primary
Metropolitan	C	Catholic	Secondary
Rural	D	Government	Primary
Remote	E	Independent	Primary/Secondary
Regional	F	Government	Secondary
Outer metropolitan	G	Government	Secondary
Regional	H	Government & Catholic	Secondary*

\*This site encompassed four high schools – three government and one Catholic – as well as two universities, a TAFE institute, the regional office of a State department of education, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the local council, Aboriginal education workers, an Aboriginal education unit, local industry and community representatives.

It may be seen from Table 1 that the sites were chosen so as to ensure the inclusion of schools from all sectors and in a range of socio-economic settings. This was consistent with the requirement that the outcome of the work contributed to the promotion of partnerships across all schools, “regardless of sector and socio-economic and cultural conditions”. More than this, the schools in this study were a genuinely eclectic group, operating in a wide range of settings. It is hoped, therefore, that many schools will find resonances in the accounts given in these cases studies.

The research questions to be answered by the research were:

1. What are the elements that build and sustain effective family-school-community partnerships in Indigenous contexts?
2. What are the barriers to building and maintaining effective family-school-community partnerships in Indigenous contexts?
3. In what ways do those elements differ between communities?
4. How do the findings align with the national *Family-School Partnerships Framework*?
5. How do the findings align with previous studies of Family-School-Community partnerships, particularly the study conducted by Saulwick Muller in 2006 and related 2009 studies by Muller and Erebus International?



6. What implications arise out of the study for the promotion and ongoing review of the *Family-School Partnerships Framework*?

The instruments used to obtain these data are given in Appendix 1.

Also, as part of an effort to make connections between the findings of the 2006 study by Muller and the current research, principals and others in leadership positions were asked to comment on a brief list of key findings from that research.

## Reflections on the context of this study

Australia in the second decade of the twenty-first century is a nation coming to terms with its past. It spent the first decade of the new century, and the last decade of the old, disputing that past in a long political and intellectual engagement that became known as the History Wars (Blainey 1993, McIntyre & Clark 2003). The central issue in that dispute concerned the treatment of the Aboriginal peoples by the European settlers, and the consequences of that treatment, not only for Aboriginal people but for the conscience of the nation.

The debate spiked from time to time in response to specific events: judgments of the High Court conferring land rights on Aboriginal people; attempts to adopt a document of reconciliation; acknowledgment of past practices in which Aboriginal children were taken from their parents as part of a process designed, at least in part, to hasten the demise of the Aboriginal race<sup>1</sup>, and whether an apology was due to Aboriginal people for this and other past wrongs.

No formal consensus emerged from these debates, but what did emerge was a political imperative that an apology was required. What also emerged was a livelier appreciation of the extent to which Aboriginal people today, taken as a whole, lived lives that were significantly disadvantaged when compared with those of non-Aboriginal Australians. This disadvantage showed up most acutely in two areas: health and education. The recognition of it led to the adoption in 2008 of a range of aspirations and policies under the rubric *Closing the Gap*, which were designed to reduce and then eliminate these disadvantages.

In parallel with these developments in Australia, social scientists across the Western world were grappling with the legacy of rationalist economic theory and high individualism as expounded by Friedman, Hayek and Rand, and implemented politically by Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of Britain, and Ronald Reagan as President of the United States. This legacy was considered to be at least a contributing cause of increased social fragmentation in the United States, and a depletion in that nation's social capital (Putnam 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> *Bringing Them Home – Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, 1997.

Social capital is a foundational idea on which parents' engagement in their children's education is built. By coincidence, it has its roots in education, having been coined by the state supervisor of schools in West Virginia, L. J. Hanafan (1916). He explained that social capital accumulated when the individual came into contact with his neighbours, and they with other neighbours. The resultant social intercourse "may immediately satisfy his social needs and may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community". This lineage of the term was traced by Putnam in his revelatory account of what he called the collapse and revival of American community.

The fragmentation of various Western societies during the final two or three decades of the twentieth century, typified by the American experience traced and measured by Putnam, awakened in political scientists, sociologists and educationalists a recognition that something had been lost. The idea of social capital was rediscovered, and its roots in education were re-learned. Research had shown that:

- social fragmentation led to social alienation;
- what happened in school was not on its own enough to determine a child's life chances;
- what happened at home was crucial, and
- trust, networks and norms of reciprocity were important in the development of young people.

Putting these together, educators set about finding ways of engaging parents as active partners in the education of their children as a means of catalysing an integrated and self-regenerating cycle: by creating partnerships it was likely that children's educational outcomes would be improved; social capital in the school's community would grow; richer social capital would also feed into better life chances for students.

The extent of the efforts to engage parents as partners can be deduced from the 2002 review by Desforges and Abouchar (2002) of parental engagement. They uncovered tens of thousands of citations, and surveyed activity in the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia as part of what became a landmark study in the field.

These two large themes – closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and rebuilding social capital – come together in the work being done by the schools in this study to develop and sustain partnerships between themselves and the Aboriginal families and communities they serve.

In this way they are contributing to a major project of nation-building: improvements in the life chances of Aboriginal people, especially children, reduction in social inequality and enhancement of social capital. Though they do not speak in these terms, they reveal a full appreciation of this as a motive force in what they do.

## Findings

The findings of this research are presented under a series of topic headings, which developed organically as the data were analysed. While they are not organised under the headings of the specific research questions, they do nonetheless answer those questions in a multi-faceted way which, it is hoped, does justice to the complexities and subtleties of the insights provided by the respondents.

### **The foundation: belief, conviction and school culture**

Schools are under no illusions about the hard work required to build partnerships with Aboriginal families and communities. It means finding the resources and psychic energy for an endeavour that even today not every teacher or principal regards as part of a school's core responsibilities. In turn, this means it is often necessary to persuade the staff to redefine their concept of education beyond the imparting of knowledge, and even beyond the holistic development of the child, to the child's developmental wellbeing. The concept of developmental wellbeing includes the child's life circumstances: the quality of his or her home life, the state of his or her health, the socio-economic conditions of his or her household.

It also means persuading teachers of the rightness and necessity of opening their classroom doors to parents, of being prepared to welcome parents in, and of finding ways to engage them directly in the education of their children. This requires in many cases a redefining of the classroom teacher's understanding of her prerogatives so that they are extended to promoting parental inclusiveness. The need, or even the rightness, of this is not accepted by all teachers, and in difficult settings where relations with the parents have sometimes been hostile, it is contested territory.

To even begin to make partnerships work, then, requires the creation of a staff room culture in which parents are seen as genuine partners in the education of their children. To create a culture in which Aboriginal parents are seen as genuine partners often requires much more: the overcoming of negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people on the part of school staff and

the overcoming of big psychological barriers on the part of Aboriginal parents whose own experiences of school were often negative.

It is not easy work but, as the schools in this study show, it is not impossible and can be inspirational. Their stories are not happy-ever-after tales. They are stories of constructive struggle where success never comes overnight but does come, the product of a mixture of qualities that become clear as the stories unfold.

This study has revealed a number of beliefs that are common to the schools involved. These beliefs provide the motive power that drives their work in developing and maintaining partnerships between the school and Aboriginal families and communities. It is these beliefs that sustain them in the day-to-day challenges they all face, and make them resolve to stay the course:

- That parents are the first educators of their children.
- That children do better when their parents are engaged in their education.
- That the best way to ensure that a child develops to his or her full potential is to create a partnership between the school and families.
- That Aboriginal parents, like all parents, want the best for their children.
- That many Aboriginal parents are alienated from schools as a result of their own bad experiences there.
- That if there is to be a partnership, it is necessary to overcome this alienation.
- That overcoming this alienation requires the building of trust between the school and Aboriginal parents.
- That the school has the responsibility to make the first move in building this trust.
- That Aboriginal family structures are different from non-Aboriginal family structures, and that these differences need to be accommodated by the school.
- That this means recognising the role of the extended family and the community in the upbringing of children.
- That many Aboriginal parents are not starting from the same level of advantage as many non-Aboriginal parents because of the legacies of the past.

- That the school should do whatever it can to help Aboriginal families overcome this disadvantage.
- That education is the key to the current generation of Aboriginal children leaving disadvantage behind.
- That helping Aboriginal families and children break out of disadvantage is a moral imperative.
- That doing so is a nation-building project fundamental to the future good of Australian society.

These beliefs spring from a variety of value systems and traditions. For some, they spring from the social justice mission of their religious order: for example, the Edmund Rice tradition of what used to be called Christian Brothers schools. For others they spring from deeply held humanist principles. For others again they spring from strongly held convictions about the role of education in society, and for others from a commitment to values such as equity, human dignity and ordinary decency.

What is common to all is that to the extent that they run deep in the school culture, it is because they run deep in the school leadership.

### **The decisive factor: leadership**

It is certain, from this and from other research we have done<sup>2</sup> that the decisive factor in whether a school has the foundational conviction on which a culture conducive to effective partnerships can develop, is the attitude of the principal, and that principal's capacity to lead. All other important ingredients might be present, but if the principal does not effectually lead the effort with strength and conviction, it is unlikely that the effort will succeed.

Without exception, the sites visited in this study have such leaders. The sources of their energy and conviction vary, as noted earlier, but they all exhibit an absolute commitment to the partnerships ideal, specifically where Aboriginal families and communities are concerned.

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<sup>2</sup> Family-School Partnerships Project op.cit.

They accord it very high priority. They invest themselves personally in it, and devote considerable time and resources to it.

They are unequivocal about this commitment, and are prepared to be bold in taking action to bring their staff along with them. In doing so, they tend to be collegial and supportive at first, but uncompromising if that approach fails.

In recruiting staff, they place a high priority on the attitude of applicants towards the role of parents and communities in children's education, and on their attitude to developing direct partnerships with parents. Applicants who do not exhibit what seems to the principal to be a mature appreciation of, and commitment to, these requirements usually do not get a job offer.

These principals also lead by example: their doors are open to parents; they make themselves visible and available to parents; they look for ways of developing the curriculum that makes it more accessible to Aboriginal students and their families; they make a point of creating a school environment where Aboriginal symbolism is visible and ubiquitous.

The level of commitment on the part of the incumbent principal remains a potent force even in schools with a long tradition of this work. In schools where there has not been a long tradition, the level of commitment by the principal is decisive in establishing it.

This became evident in a positive way in several schools where the incumbent principal had either inherited a culture of commitment to this work or had created it. It also became evident in a negative way in a couple of schools that were originally intended for inclusion in this study but were in the end excluded because the principal said outright that while the school had been good at this in the past, more recently it had fallen away and was in the process of being rebuilt. These changes coincided with changes in the principalship.

The reasons became clear in the course of the study. For all the collegiality that schools prize, in the end it is the principal who sets the priorities, the tone, the way people interact with each other. It is the principal's vision of the role of education that becomes the school's vision. Over



time, staff who do not share this vision tend to leave. The principal then hires staff who do share the vision.

### Overcoming barriers

There are many barriers to be overcome in developing partnerships between schools and Aboriginal families. Some of these are the same as the barriers to developing partnerships with all parents: time pressures, work pressures, the competing demands involved in raising a number of children; logistical difficulties such as transport.

However, with many Aboriginal people, there are additional barriers:

- One is that many Aboriginal parents had bad experiences at school, and as a result feel alienated from it.
- Another is that many Aboriginal people do not feel comfortable with the formalities that are a standard part of school life, especially meetings conducted in what seem to them to be the disconcertingly direct manner of "European" discourse.
- Another is that as a result of these disjunctions, they find it difficult to summon up the commitment to schooling that is needed to participate as partners.

On top of these barriers, disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people live in economically disadvantaged circumstances, giving rise to what they talk about as "shame".

"Shame" can take many forms: not having the correct uniform; not being able to provide lunch; not being able to afford excursions; not getting the child to school on time. These are acute sensitivities for many Aboriginal people. In addition, there are sometimes "shames" from their own school days which still cast a shadow: the humiliations caused by racial discrimination; the sense of not belonging in the institutional setting of schools; the sense of academic inadequacy.

Aboriginal people interviewed for this study speak frankly and courageously about this concept of shame. Many have had to overcome it in order to actively participate in their children's schooling. In the schools where this research was done, there is a recognition of this barrier, and efforts are being made to reduce or eliminate altogether these occasions of shame.

In these schools it doesn't matter if the child arrives late, or has not had breakfast, or is not in uniform, or does not have the money for an excursion. These are not considered to be problems at all. They are all fixed on the spot without fuss by respectful and empathetic staff who go out of their way to make both child and parent feel welcome and valued.

Many schools have breakfast clubs, not just for Aboriginal students but for all students. There are uniform pools, again not just for Aboriginal students but for all; similarly with lunches. Fundamentally, these are schools where disadvantage and difficult home circumstances are not allowed to get in the way of a child's education, so far as humanly possible.

In some schools, especially in remote areas, the school provides transport to and from school, the buses being staffed by a driver and either a teacher or community liaison person known to, and trusted by, the community. This person can inquire at the front door of the student's home if necessary about where the child is and whether they are ready for school.

A sense of shame also inhibits some Aboriginal parents from entering the school through the front office. Not only do they find the architecture forbidding, but too many times over the course of their lives they have been the object of disapproving stares or terse remarks from the front office. Some of the schools in this study recognise this and have responded by providing a special room for parents – all parents – which can be reached by a side door without the need to come in through the front. Aboriginal parents in particular tend to find this a relief.

Schools that have found ways to eliminate or at least minimise these "shames" in the dealings between the school and families have taken an important step in the process of developing

partnerships with Aboriginal families and communities by overcoming or reducing this significant psycho-social barrier.

### **Core practices in making partnerships real**

There is a core set of practices which, taken together, provide a basis for converting the schools' beliefs and convictions into policy and action. They are:

**An outreach approach.** These schools do not sit in their offices or classrooms and wait for parents – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – to come to them. They reach out, in person, in phone calls, in emails. They use whatever technologies are available, whether it is to maintain contact with far-flung Aboriginal families in remote parts of Australia, or families in the neighbourhood.

**Immediate and personal contact.** They do not rely on newsletters or websites or wait for parent-teacher nights to communicate on matters of particular relevance to an individual student, or to invite parents or families to a school event, but ring up, or walk over to a parent in the yard for a chat.

**Attention to positive news.** These schools do not contact parents only when something has gone wrong, but make a point of contacting them to tell of students' achievements. If they have to ring with negative news, they also ensure that they draw attention to something the student has done well.

**Resourcing the effort.** These schools have at least one staff member whose primary responsibility is to make and maintain contact with Aboriginal parents. In some schools, that is the staff member's fulltime job. In others it is a substantial part of their wellbeing portfolio. In some schools it is the work of several people.

**Providing a first person of contact for Aboriginal families.** This person develops a relationship with the families, building trust, being an advocate for the families at the school, and

facilitating the development of relationships with other members of staff, especially the student's teachers.

**Providing an Aboriginal presence.** Having an Aboriginal person in the front office or as someone whom the parents can contact directly has proved to be an effective means of creating a relationship between the school and Aboriginal families. It says to Aboriginal people, "You belong here and are welcome here".

**Fixing the front office culture.** For many Aboriginal people, their experiences with staff in the front offices of schools reinforce feelings of shame and inadequacy that they carry from their own school days. Principals and staff involved in the partnership work of the schools in this study are aware – sometimes acutely aware – of the importance of a welcoming front office culture. Some are attempting to create it; others have taken decisive action to do so. Not infrequently this involves a change of personnel.

**Providing a communal venue.** Some schools provide a parents' room where they can socialise informally. Some are equipped with a computer, and classes in computer use or other skills are provided. In some schools, parents can come and go to this room without having to come through the school's front door and negotiate the front office. For many, this removes a large inhibitor because it takes away the feelings of inadequacy and of not belonging that many Aboriginal people feel when approaching schools.

**Requiring teachers to make direct contact.** In many schools, teachers are required to make contact with Aboriginal families, and to deal with issues as they arise, without relying on the Aboriginal liaison officer. In these schools, teachers are encouraged to make a point of contacting Aboriginal families with good news, not only with bad.

**Being attentive.** These schools find ways to contact their Aboriginal families frequently, sometimes just to stay in touch, sometimes to bring them up to date informally with what their child is doing, sometimes to invite them personally to some event.

## The concept of equal treatment

In other research we have done in the field of Aboriginal policy<sup>3</sup>, the concept of equal treatment has come up frequently. It came up in this research too. It can be a source of misunderstanding and so can make it more difficult than would otherwise be the case for school communities to create a culture conducive to partnerships with Aboriginal people. The core difficulty arises from people's differing interpretations of the meaning of "equal treatment".

Unsurprisingly, given Australians' democratic instincts and ingrained sense of a "fair go", many people intuitively interpret *equal* treatment as meaning *identical* treatment: everyone should be treated the same. However, this interpretation does not take account of the fact that different individuals may be starting from very different circumstances, some more advantaged and others less advantaged. Identical treatment, in those circumstances, serves merely to preserve the relative advantages and disadvantages, whereas equality of treatment serves to narrow those relativities with the object of bringing equality where it did not previously exist.

The evidence from this study suggests that this concept is not widely appreciated in school staff rooms, even if it is well understood by school leaders, in particular by principals. So when stationary or uniforms or other forms of material support are provided to needy families – who in many of these settings tend to be Aboriginal families – the question is asked by some members of staff: Why don't we give these to everyone? The general picture indicates the need for some education of staff in this matter.

In the context of this study, it has another side too. This is not about material support but about access to programs.

Some schools have introduced programs originally designed to provide special assistance to Aboriginal students. However, because of the design of the programs, Aboriginal students are

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, *Research into Issues Related to a Document of Reconciliation*, Report for the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, May 2000.

required to be withdrawn from their main classes. This has the undesirable and unintended consequences of making the Aboriginal students feel singled out and therefore “different”, and of separating them from their non-Aboriginal friends when they would prefer not to be separated.

Schools in this study that have confronted this problem have tended to resolve it by removing race as a criterion for inclusion. In doing so, they also exemplify for their students and school community the “colour blindness” that contributes to tolerance and acceptance, and eliminate the camouflage in which exclusion (for example, of non-Aboriginal students) is presented in the guise of inclusion. In other words, they are being inclusive in a way that does not have the effect of excluding others. Intellectual integrity of this kind tends to enhance the school in the estimation of its community.

### Some matters concerning teacher training

This research did not involve any inquiries into the content of university degree courses in education, and so the following observations are made on the basis of empirical evidence acquired in the course of the fieldwork, and in one respect from a presentation made at a conference on family, school and community partnerships to which the researchers were invited in the course of the study.

The conference presentation was of the findings from a qualitative research project carried out by the University of Sydney into the teaching of partnerships-related topics in bachelor of education courses. The researcher reported that she had conducted 22 focus groups at 16 universities involving more than 300 Bachelor of Education third-year undergraduates. Not a single respondent had heard of the landmark Australian framework, *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A guide for Schools and Families*, published by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (as it then was) in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The framework was prepared by the national parent bodies - the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) - the Australian Government, and other key stakeholders including State and Territory government and non-government school authorities and school principal associations. Trialled in 61 schools, its effectiveness was evaluated by Saulwick Muller Social Research in 2006. The framework was endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 2008.

The researcher presenting her findings at the conference was making the point that in the academy, the amount of attention being paid to developing in student teachers an understanding of the concept of family-school and community partnerships is minimal, if it exists at all. This has clear implications for the promotion and ongoing review of the *Family-School Partnerships Framework*.

The empirical evidence from the fieldwork for this present study indicates a lack of preparedness among young teachers for the parental partnership component of their work, to say nothing of the demands that might be made of them working in settings with a substantial Aboriginal population. In several schools, principals and sometimes fellow teachers spoke of the trepidation and sometimes the lack of empathy felt by young teachers towards Aboriginal families. Some young teachers who were interviewed, while admitting to initial nervousness, had largely overcome these misgivings and were growing in confidence generally as a result. Several, as a result of taking a particular interest, were now determined to teach what they regard as a more honest and comprehensive history of Australia since European settlement than they themselves had been given.

The evidence suggests that their trepidation or wariness stems not from conscious prejudice, but from lack of knowledge.

### **The importance of symbolism**

Many of these schools fly the Aboriginal flag alongside the Australian national flag. Many have posters or artwork depicting Aboriginal motifs in the reception area. One school has a bold yellow poster on the front door welcoming visitors to the school in the area's Aboriginal language, and stating what the language is. The same school has a large garden of native plants designed by the Aboriginal community. At another school, the football jumpers had been redesigned to incorporate an Aboriginal motif in the school colours. These symbols have a positive impact on the perceptions of Aboriginal families and communities. They feel they and their culture count. They feel proud.

These schools also take every opportunity to bring Aboriginal culture into school activities. If a new building is to be erected, a smoking ceremony is held on the site before work begins, and an Aboriginal ceremony will be part of the opening celebrations. Perhaps the new building will carry an Aboriginal name. One school has named its new hall by using the local Aboriginal word for “meeting place”.

Acknowledgment of country and its original inhabitants is a settled part of all formalities. It is simply expected, so that omission of it is seen as a lack of respect by everyone – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

Many of the schools in this study, having become familiar with local culture and language, have integrated them into the formal curriculum, taking them beyond symbolism into the lived experience of its students and staff. This tends to forge an especially strong bond between the school and its Aboriginal community.

### **Respectfulness and manner of speech**

There is a difference between the ways in which Aboriginal people can speak to each other and how non-Aboriginal people can speak to Aboriginal people, while maintaining respectfulness.

Many times in the course of this study, respondents spoke of how Aboriginal people are able to speak robustly to other Aboriginal people, in a way that would be offensive coming from a non-Aboriginal person. For example, at a school where the front office staff had long ago been removed for their bossy treatment of Aboriginal people, an Aboriginal liaison officer was admired for being able to say to an Aboriginal mother words to this effect: “Come on, sis, get your act together.” At another school, the Aboriginal co-ordinator made a point of saying that she spoke to the students and parents exactly as if they were all at home together, and not in “some flash boarding school”.

The researchers have observed this phenomenon before in studies of Aboriginal issues, and consider it to be important. Firstly, a failure to appreciate it can lead to offence and alienation.



Secondly, having on the staff an Aboriginal person – someone who has “walked in the shoes” of an Aboriginal person – significantly increases the school’s capacity to communicate effectively with Aboriginal people. Such people bring legitimacy to their communications, an ability to speak in ways that connect with Aboriginal people, whilst maintaining respectfulness. In short, they can speak the language – figuratively as well as literally.

### **Connections between the 2006 findings and the current research**

As noted in the methodology, principals and others in school leadership positions were shown a list which distils elements of successful practice in the building of successful family-school partnerships in 2006. This comes from the Saulwick Muller research referred to earlier.

The respondents were asked which, if any, of them resonated with them as elements of good practice.

1. Tap into the interests of parents. In particular, emphasise the connection with their child’s learning.
2. Break down the teacher/non-teacher barrier by allowing for activities that are not directly education-related.
3. Use multiple ways of communicating with parents, but personal contact is essential.
4. Appoint a parent/community liaison person to the staff.
5. Involve parents who can champion the initiative among parents.
6. Be a venue for, and agent of, parental self-growth.
7. Open your mind to parents’ needs and views.
8. Ask for, and value, the opinions of parents outside the formal school structures such as the Parents & Friends Association/group.
9. Make it clear you think of parents as genuine partners.
10. Be prepared to engage in community capacity-building.
11. Be visible and available to parents.
12. Be patient.

In the view of the current respondents, the key elements are:

1. The connection with the child’s learning.
2. Personal contact.

3. A community liaison officer.
4. Openness to parents' needs and views.
5. Making it clear you think of parents as genuine partners.
6. Being visible and available.
7. Being patient.

## Case studies

Each of these case studies consists of a narrative followed by a list of what the researchers distilled as the key factors in the success of the school's work.

### Case A

Case A is a Catholic college for boys located in the outer suburbs of a large city. Of its 42 Indigenous students, 32 are boarders. They come vast distances – from Central Australia, Arnhem Land, the Torres Strait islands, far north Queensland. Many come from small remote communities living in the traditional way. Ties of kinship to their communities are strong. Their sense of belonging to place is strong. Their connection to the land is strong. Yet they come thousands of kilometres from their families, communities and their land because the school reaches out to them and they see an opportunity they and their families wish to take.

They are prepared to make the large emotional sacrifice required, as are their families. For a few, it proves too much. For many it requires a repeated act of determination to return to school after each holiday.

What is it that creates and sustains a joint commitment of such magnitude by student, family and school?

For the school it is grounded in a longstanding philosophical commitment to social justice. For parents it is grounded in a desire to see their boys get the best possible education, and for some of them it represents the continuation of a tradition that now goes back three generations. So the important drivers are a combination of philosophical commitment, aspirations, and tradition.

It was not always so, of course. It had to begin somewhere, and in this case the roots went down deep in the school's religious tradition, part of which was a commitment to social justice. While this commitment was longstanding, in 2007 the school embarked on a deliberate effort to do more in the field of Aboriginal education. It seized the opportunity offered by the introduction of *Sporting Chance*, a Federal Government program designed to

improve the educational outcomes for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through sport and recreation.

Using these funds, it established a sporting academy and this became the vehicle for increasing its outreach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It soon became clear, however, that many of the boys were interested in academic and artistic as well as sporting pursuits, and so while the academy was the vehicle, it was not permitted to limit what the boys could become involved in.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also attract funding in the form of Abstudy grants, which are set off directly against the student's fees. So the *Sporting Chance* funding enabled the school to provide staff, and Abstudy enabled the students to cover at least part of their fees.

It was an example of a school being alert to funding possibilities and agile in taking advantage of them.

This is a school that has many of the outward appearances of affluence: imposing buildings, fine grounds. As is often the case, however, appearances are deceptive. Many of the boys – not just Aboriginal boys – attend on scholarships or bursaries or other forms of assistance. The school has an equity council, led by a director of equity services, whose job is to integrate the school's suite of support services and to ensure there is case management of the boys who need those services.

It has a particular commitment to Indigenous education. The present principal came from a school in another State where he had established a strong record of educational service to Aboriginal people. Asked if he thought his background at the previous school had influenced his appointment, he replied: "I have a suspicion that that would have assisted my application." It is clear to him that he has the full support of the board, and for the new model he has introduced for providing education to Indigenous boys.

One key aspect of his model has been to place students in ability-based groups where the focus is on academic needs, not Aboriginality, and is seen to be so.

This is emblematic of the school's sensitive and embedded promotion of racial tolerance. The principal spoke of this issue candidly:

*When the program started, there was a fear factor among what I might call the "traditional" [i.e. white] parents and families, who have a strong sense of ownership of the school. What was this going to mean?*

*In the event, the boys become friends, develop colour blindness in relation to skin colour, take their Indigenous mates home at weekends and educate the parents.*

*After five years, it has got to the point where we are all mates here.*

In fact, during the researcher's interviews with parents, the issue of race at no stage arose.

Establishing an effective educational partnership when students and staff are in a large city school and parents are in remote communities thousands of kilometres away is not easy. The school has found that it is essential to have someone on the ground who is able to make and maintain personal contact.

In some places, it is a teacher in the local school. In others it is someone who is out and about, such as someone working for the shire council, and therefore in direct contact with people on a day-to-day basis. In some places it is an Aboriginal person, in other places it is not. The important thing is that the contact is personal, informal, and through someone who is known and trusted.

The school has a boarding Head who is responsible for the wellbeing of all the boarders, and an Indigenous co-ordinator, whose role is mainly pastoral care and who is the first port of call for Aboriginal boys during the day. Both describe constant and widely varied communications with parents: photos of the boys playing chess, phone calls to discuss whether a boy should be given a leave pass, faxes and emails to keep in touch where the technology permits. The boarding Head makes field trips during which he makes personal contact with parents and says he has got to know some quite well.

The Indigenous co-ordinator is a young scientist with a laidback manner and a miniature zoo of native rodents, reptiles and birds from Central Australia which it is obvious the Aboriginal boys love to be around. He has a straight-from-the-shoulder directness which tends to attract responses from the students in similar vein. All the Aboriginal boys have to check in with him at least once a day. This is how he describes his approach:

*On the data base I can access any of the families. I pick up the phone daily to ring parents.*

*A boy might come in and say, "I haven't spoken to Grandma for a while". So I dial the number, they have a chat, I have a chat. It's all about building relationships with these families. That's one of my key roles.*

*I'm working on building reciprocal partnerships. We invite families down here, and I've just had three Indigenous families invite me up there for the holidays.*

*I rang four families this week to say g'day, this is who I am. They've got my mobile and work number. So it is about this open line of communication, and I feel that's really important.*

*Sometimes I'll tell a boy that I think it is important that someone from home knows about something we have discussed or something that has happened and I tell the boy I'm going to ring home. It might be something they're struggling with, but what I make sure I do is that if I'm going to share something that is a little bit difficult or negative, I'll always follow up with a positive as well.*

Q: Do the parents pick up the phone or send you an email?

*Absolutely they do – now. The ones I struggle with – and I'll be honest – we have wonderful relations with the people in Arnhem Land, but they are such a transient group of people: they live in outstations for the majority of the year. They live fairly traditionally in that they follow the seasons, and I love that about these people, but it just means that they can be at an outstation for three months with no phone, no laptop, no fax. So sharing information with them is tricky.*

*I say to the boys, "Your families have entered into this partnership with the school, and you have to be partners in it too."*

Q: Do they get it?

*They do. I talked to them about this the other day, and two of the boys came up at the end and said, "Gee you give a good pep talk!"*

*I said it wasn't so much a pep talk, but so long as you understood what I was talking about. And they said, "Oh absolutely we did."*

It can be seen that even under the difficulties imposed by extreme distance and cultural difference, a pro-active, personal and attentive approach is both possible and effective. In other words, partnership is about a state of mind.

### Key factors

- Philosophical conviction by the school.
- A committed principal.
- Educational aspirations by parents.
- Acuity and agility in seizing funding opportunities.
- Strongly committed leadership.
- Preparedness to devote resources to the partnership.
- Pro-active personal contact by the school.
- Outreach by the school.
- Capacity to build on tradition.

### Case B

The school in Case B could not be more different from the school in Case A in its circumstances. It is a large government primary school serving one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs of a major capital city. Of its 600 students, 100 are Aboriginal. Overall, 49% of students are from a non-English-speaking background (NESB).

Case B dramatically illustrates the crucial role of the principal in establishing a culture in which partnerships, especially with Aboriginal families and communities, can flourish. Taking over in 1999, the first thing the principal did was fix the front office.

*I was appalled by the way some of my front office staff – they're gone – spoke to children, let alone their families: "Where were you? The bell's gone. You've missed out. What are you doing?" And we are talking about our most vulnerable people. That culture has gone.*

In its place, among other things, has been the employment of a young Aboriginal man in the office, giving Aboriginal people someone with whom they can easily connect.

Another aspect of the school's culture needing attention involved the confrontational behaviour of parents who would storm in, demanding to speak to the principal.

*The way we dealt with that was, we pick up phones from seven in the morning until six at night. There is no answering service. You have to do the conversations. I can't remember the last time we had someone angry in that front office.*

*That door [indicating her own] is always open.*

And the open-door requirement has been laid on the teaching staff, as has the requirement to pick up the telephone.

*Teachers here are asked from the word go to make the connection. So if a child is not attending school, it doesn't come to a principal or an assistant or deputy. It's the teacher, who is given a script: "Oh hi. I'm (first name). Just wondering where (child's name) is. He hasn't been at school. Is everything okay?"*

*So you have the contact and it's personal. "I'm your kid's teacher. This is me. Is there anything I can help you with?"*

Personal contact by teachers is central to the school's partnership approach, and it applies particularly to Aboriginal families.

*One of the ways things fall down – and I've seen it in other schools – is that all things Aboriginal must belong to the Aboriginal workers. "They can sort it. They're their people." They are our people.*

Bureaucracy is not permitted to get in the way. If a home visit by the school staff is deemed necessary, it is made, even though it is technically a matter for the regional office.

Cultural change has also reached into the classroom. When some teachers in the early days bridled at her approach, she referred them to the purple transfer forms in her office. Since then, turnover among the 60 teaching staff has been low. Yet she finds among young teachers a surprising lack of appreciation of what life can be like for Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia.



*What my young staff have to learn is to walk in their shoes.*

In addition to employing the young Aboriginal man in the front office, the school also employs an Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO) full time. Her status in the school hierarchy is high, and she herself has credibility among Aboriginal parents because of her own tough background and self-driven achievements. This allows her to be tough on them too when necessary. The principal described what this meant:

*She can be very direct. So she'll hear them but then she'll say, "What's the matter with you, sis? Get your act together. Get these kids to school. What's going on? You can do it."*

So an Aboriginal person who has "walked in their shoes" can say these things, but a bossy non-Aboriginal office worker cannot: similar signal, entirely different reception.

The AEO speaks with admiration of what she calls the principal's "passionate" commitment to Aboriginal culture. Like the principal, she finds the attitudes of some young teachers racist, but puts it down to ignorance, telling this anecdote to illustrate the point:

*We had a new teacher and I asked her how many Aboriginal students she had in her class. And she named a few, and then said, "I've actually got quite a few brown kids in my class".*

*And I said, "Just because they're brown doesn't mean they're Aboriginal." But she still didn't get what I meant by that. Another staff member in the room mentioned it to [the principal] and she jumped on it straight away. And the next morning I got into work and in my pigeonhole is a sorry card and a box of chocolates.*

She also says that a lot of staff are intimidated by Aboriginal people because of the aggression they sometimes show, and part of her role is to calm people down before trying to sort out the problem:

*My main responsibility is to have a good relationship with the parents and make sure they have a good relationship with the staff, make sure they feel comfortable coming into the school and that the staff feel comfortable to approach the parents, instead of getting me to do it all the time.*

*I'm always hanging around outside to contact parents. I do a lot of home visits. If a child hasn't been coming to school and the teacher can't contact the parents, I do*

*home visits, find out what's happening, how we can help get them back into school. Sometimes it's the smallest thing: they haven't got a uniform or lunch.*

The AEO has a biggish room which doubles as a community room where parents can come in, have a cup of tea, talk, sometimes just "let it all out". The parents clearly have an easy sense of ownership of the room. When interviewed there for this research, they came and went at will, offered each other cups of tea, and waved at people passing the windows. Importantly, at one point a teacher came in to say to one of the parents that her child was having an anxiety attack and could she come and help. The teacher and parent clearly have a strong working relationship to assist this child, whose needs are considerable.

Many families endure long bus rides past many other schools so that they can come here. Here is a taste of the reasons they gave:

*The school is like a family. It's not just a school.*

*All the parents get included in whatever happens in the school. We're all welcomed.*

And about the principal:

*When she comes to you, she's got that smiling face.*

*You can talk to her about anything. I've spoken to her many times – about personal issues too.*

Some of these mothers were students at the school under the same principal:

*She's like a grandmother to us.*

*I missed her so much I came back for work experience.*

They also feel able to rely on the school for help with formalities such as referrals or witnessing of documents. Requests like this are attended to promptly and courteously. For people in straitened circumstances without ready recourse to professional assistance, this allays many anxieties.

In the case of Aboriginal parents, it also helps relieve them of the burden of “shames” that so many say they carry. “Shames” include not having enough money for a school excursion, as well as difficulties dealing with bureaucracy and institutions. It is a deeper and broader concept than is familiar to other Australian ears, as the parents explained:

*All Aboriginals are very “shamed”. We get it, but it’s hard to teach somebody else. We’re very different people, and we think differently.*

*When I went to school I used to feel shame because we didn’t have a lot of money and I used to have soggy baked bean sandwiches. And I used to feel shame. It’s weird to try to explain it.*

The school exhibits a tacit understanding of this.

Educationally the school has a wide range of specific programs to help Aboriginal children: Monday Maths Mob, Koori Club, Make It Count, Koori Play and Chat.

The teacher running the Maths Mob program says it is about building parents’ confidence in being able to help their children with maths.

*We are trying to give it an Aboriginal identity without being tokenistic.*

*I’m a big promoter of building those relationships. It’s really important. Research has shown that’s how children learn best. There are only a few hours a day at school, and if education is something that is fostered at home, that’s only a good thing.*

The school involves parents through a process of consultation in the development of their children’s personalised learning plans. These consultations take place in what the school calls “wrap-arounds” – not “meetings”. The semantics are important. Aboriginal parents tend not to like the formality of “meetings”, but the “wrap-around” is so called because it produces a plan which “wraps around” the child, at home and school. This personalised terminology neutralises the underlying formality. For these “wrap-arounds”, the school provides food. Parents, grandparents, teacher, the AEO and child all sit around and talk about the child’s journey through school.

Instead of conventional parent-teacher interviews, the school has what it calls “Pride Learning Afternoons” where it gets all the Aboriginal children together and the parents come to what is more like a social gathering. It takes the sting of accountability out of the occasion.

Expectations are high. The school’s symbol is a lion, representing pride, and it is ubiquitous: on uniforms, walls, stationary and lapel badges. The school rules are embodied in the “Pride Guide”. Parents who had been pupils at the school say they use it still for guidance in life.

### Key factors

- Strong leadership by a principal of conviction.
- Preparedness to devote resources to the partnership.
- Pro-active personal contact by the school.
- Outreach by the school.
- Unrelenting insistence on cultural respectfulness.
- Making individual teachers responsible for relationships.
- Employing personnel dedicated to partnership-building with Aboriginal people.
- Meeting parents’ needs in the broadest possible way.
- Sensitivity to nuances of culture and language.
- Providing a room that parents can call their own.
- Having an Aboriginal presence in the front office.

### Case C

The school in Case C is in many respects similar to the school in Case A: a large Catholic college for boys in a capital city, its architectural hauteur belied by a longstanding philosophical commitment to social justice. Its outreach to Aboriginal families across New South Wales, Queensland and northern Australia is just one aspect – though a large and important one – of its social justice mission. Its student body of nearly 1500 includes wards of the state, refugees and orphans.

The principal sees education as a close partnership between school and family, but says it is getting more difficult to sustain such a partnership because in so many families, both parents are working. How, then, does the school seek to accomplish it when parents live thousands of kilometres away, sometimes in extremely remote settings?

The critical connector is the school's Indigenous co-ordinator, who is a high-profile Indigenous sportswoman. Historically the school has drawn Aboriginal boys from New South Wales, far north Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and she visits communities across these regions as part of the school's outreach to them. If a boy wants to enrol, the extended family comes to the school, usually with other families from the same community – Darwin or Alice Springs or Palm Island. The Indigenous co-ordinator shows them around the school and talks about the importance of Aboriginal culture there. It then becomes a decision for the families whether this is where they want their son to be.

The first days at school are emotionally difficult for the boy, the family and the community. The school is looking for ways to better manage the transition, perhaps by gaining a deeper prior understanding of the family and community dynamics, trying to better anticipate what the issues might be, and then reviewing what is done by way of introducing families and communities to the school when they come for the decision-making visit.

When the boy starts school, the families are accommodated for the first day or two in a nearby motel to ease the separation. While this often helps, sometimes it makes no difference. The principal explained:

*This year, one boy lasted only an hour because his mother refused to go home without him, and another boy was here for about a week, but Mum was ringing every night and saying, "You're missed. Your brothers and sisters won't go to bed of a night because they're missing you so much."*

If a boy decides to return home, the school promises to keep a place for him if he ever wishes to come back. Those who stay – the school has 76 Indigenous students of whom 50 are boarders – prove to be genuine stayers, there being a 97% retention rate through to Year 12. These boys have as their emotional and academic mainstays the Indigenous co-ordinator and

her assistant, who is not Indigenous but who is a school teacher with experience of teaching in remote areas, and provides academic support.

The position of co-ordinator is the basic building block of the school's partnership structure. The principal says it is essential that a school wishing to develop partnerships with Indigenous families have a position in the school dedicated to this purpose, that the person in that position be Indigenous, and that the person be very flexible – able and willing to take phone calls at weekends, at six o'clock in the morning and eleven o'clock at night. For this reason, it is equally essential that the person has back-up and support mechanisms, otherwise he or she will burn out.

In addition to this role as the key communicator between school and families, the co-ordinator also has an educational role in that she has the capacity to educate staff about the needs of the Indigenous boys, and is able to promote ways of including Indigenous culture in the school curriculum and day-to-day activities.

Another part of her job is to seek out programs designed to support Aboriginal young people, such as sources of funding or scholarships or mentoring programs of the kind run by sporting organisations. Like the school in Case A, this school spends considerable amounts of its own money on the education of Indigenous boys in the form of bursaries and scholarships, and needs to be alert to opportunities to supplement the funding.

The Indigenous co-ordinator's role begins with outreach. For example, the Hermannsberg community south-west of Alice Springs had contacted her through family connections asking for help. A trip was being planned to find out how the school could help. It might be they want books for the local school, so there was a drive on to collect them anyway. It might be that they want help preparing children for boarding school. She makes trips like this every year.

For the boys already at the school, she stands in loco parentis.

*I talk to the boys like they were at home. And the same with the parents. The way they talk to me, I speak back to them the same way.*

And like the AEO at school B, she has walked in their shoes:

*I've lived their journey. I went to a school about the same size as this.*

As with the AEO, this gives legitimacy to her way of speaking – rebuking, cajoling, kidding along – which would be offensive coming from a non-Aboriginal person.

One of the more far-reaching changes she has made has been to genuinely integrate the Aboriginal students into the school. Before her time, the Aboriginal boys' program was run by two non-Aboriginal staff members who sought to protect them, to help them get away with things other boys couldn't. While the intentions were honourable, the consequences were bad: the Aboriginal boys felt different, separate, and this only added to their sense of already being disconnected from their lands and communities. The Indigenous co-ordinator is also sensitive to how this separation might be perceived:

*Some people compare Aboriginal children at boarding school with the Stolen Generation, and looked at on the surface it could be – if you're not embracing the Aboriginal culture.*

She sees to it the Indigenous culture is highly visible. In addition to flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands flags, the school last year played football in jerseys she designed with the school colours worked into local Aboriginal motifs. A gifted artist, she has also produced a large Aboriginal painting incorporating local Aboriginal motifs and symbols from the school's religious tradition. This hangs prominently in the foyer. The house shirts have Aboriginal designs.

She also makes sure the school as a whole does celebrations of sorry days, and that any Aboriginal curriculum content is checked by elders to make sure it is correct.

*We do acknowledgement of country, we do welcome to country, we get an elder in whenever anything of significance happens. One of the things I love is to see non-Aboriginal boys walking around with Indigenous artwork on their shirts. It's seen. It's everywhere.*

What she regards as a key factor in the success of the work she does is that the principal gives her a free hand, does not attempt to second-guess her assessments of students, her decisions about managing them, or her relationship with the families. This means people don't have to wait for decisions to be handed down, and that they know she can deliver on her promises.

*They all know that if I say something will happen, it will happen. We are very open and honest with the kids. They know they can come and tell us absolutely anything because we're their guardians while they're here.*

*You're not giving up your parental rights when you send the kids to us, but you're giving us leeway to make some decisions for them because we can see what's going on.*

*The kids will ring up their parents and tell them something and then we'll ring up and tell them the real story, and then we will work out what to do. It's always a joint decision.*

In this setting, teachers do not make direct contact with parents: it is all done through the coordinator.

*There's one line of communication for the kids in this program. I'm their "parent". So if the teachers want to contact home, they come to me first.*

*Some of our parents can't handle contact from the teachers, but they can handle it from me because I'll deliver it differently.*

Some students come from difficult family circumstances: they are only allowed to see one side of the family or there are restraining orders out on one parent; others come from homes with both parents and siblings and great supportive families. It is essential to know these things.

*We know everything about these kids: their background, circumstances, all the horrors and all the good stories.*

### **Key factors**

- Strong leadership by a principal of conviction.
- Preparedness to devote resources to the partnership.
- Pro-active personal contact by the school.
- Outreach by the school.



- Well-qualified Indigenous person as the key connector.
- Making Indigenous culture a highly visible and integrated part of school life.
- Being inclusive in a way that does not unintentionally exclude others.

## Case D

Case D is a large government primary school in a rural town, with 60 Aboriginal students – and growing – in its enrolment of 550 students. One reason for the growth in the enrolment of Aboriginal students is that there is a division within the town’s Aboriginal community, and so one set of families send their children to this school, and the other send their children to another school. However, it soon becomes evident that many other factors are at work.

One becomes apparent straightaway: countless numbers of Aboriginal paintings done by the students festoon the windows, doors and interior walls. By the time a visitor reaches the leafy central courtyard, a signal has been received that says, “We place a high value on Aboriginal culture here and we are proud of what our students create”.

Another becomes apparent as discussion with the principal unfolds. She has been in the position for three years, and while her immediate past appointment was to a school in an affluent semi-rural area on the outskirts of a major city, she had previously spent two years teaching in the Northern Territory in a school where half the students were Aboriginal. She came back “south” determined to do something to make life better for children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

*Working in the Northern Territory brought me back to what teaching was about for kids who don’t have a great home life. Every kid deserves the best start they can get.*

And so with an established career that would fit her for a principalship in any setting, she chose this school, three-and-a-half hours’ drive from the nearest capital city. She came first as a relieving principal and, finding the feel of the school “magnificent”, applied successfully for the substantive position.

Establishing connections with the Aboriginal community was a high priority, but it turned out to be harder than she thought. She set up morning teas. A few people came, but it was, “What do we want to make relationships with you for? You’re only coming in. You’re not staying.”

Her Koori Education Support Officer (KESO) also came with complications: he is an Aboriginal man from the other side of the continent and so he is not of the local people or country. This meant the local people initially treated him as an outsider. However, because of the fractious history between the two factions in the town, the fact that he is an outsider means that he is also seen as impartial. Over time, he has won the trust of the Aboriginal people at the school, and is the absolutely critical connection between the school and its Aboriginal families.

This was brought home to the principal when he had six months off:

*All my attendance [of Aboriginal students] went down. All my communication went down. As soon as he came back, in a week it was amazing.*

*[The wellbeing co-ordinator] and I would work with Koori families and make phone calls and that kind of thing, but he goes into their houses. He knows where they live. If they’re not with this family, they’ll be with that family.*

*We can’t find people. We don’t know what’s happening to them. They’ll take off and we don’t know what the issue is.*

The KESO himself has been in the school eight years. His role was altered by the previous principal from classroom support to community outreach. He is the key intermediary between school and families. He also goes many an extra mile in the course of his work: recruiting Aboriginal boys into a local football team and driving them to and from matches at the weekend; getting out on the streets with strategies to protect the children from violence generated by the internecine conflict and making sure people comply with Apprehended Violence Orders.

Indispensable though he is, the principal does not want the KESO to be the only conduit through which teachers communicate with Aboriginal families:

*My teachers have to develop a bit of muscle around this. They will readily ring a white person to discuss issues, but if it involves a Koori student, they want to get [the KESO] to do it.*

She has gone out of her way to recruit teachers with good social skills, and now she wants them using those skills to create and maintain relationships with Aboriginal families. If a child is away, it is for the class teacher to ring home and find out if there is anything they can do. She also wants the teachers making at least two phone calls per term to each home to touch base and report something positive about the child.

As part of building the necessary “muscle”, staff are being given professional development on the development of parental partnerships generally, and are being exposed to the Stronger Smarter program to help them develop effective partnerships with Aboriginal families in particular.

A teacher who has done the program says she learned several useful strategies for engaging Aboriginal parents and had become more confident in doing so. Other teachers, she says, remain “a bit nervous” and look to the KESO to make contact. She says she has also become more confident in her teaching of Aboriginal topics:

*It’s been the usual stereotypical things: here’s the dot paintings, the food, the tools they used. This year – I think because of Stronger Smarter – I’ve felt a bit more confident and we took the kids through the Stolen Generation, the impact on the Aboriginal people of white settlement, and really got into the nitty-gritty. And the kids really got into it.*

She says she has seen an extra effort put in since the current principal took over, and measures this by seeing more Koori parents willing to come into the school to speak to the teachers and be involved in the school. She also says the teachers are making the effort to make connections with the families through phone calls, special days, family get-togethers on mother’s and father’s day, and events such as the NAIDOC<sup>5</sup> celebrations.

Like other schools in this study, the school in Case D is sharp in spotting funding opportunities, as a result of which it is able to run a range of programs, including Next Steps, which covers literacy and numeracy, and the Clontarf program to help Aboriginal boys. It also has the

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<sup>5</sup> National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee.

services of a children's advocate who is employed by the shire council under an Australian Government funded program, Communities for Children. Although not on the school staff, she starts her day there and, with someone provided by the school's wellbeing team, runs a breakfast program and play group in a local park close to where many Aboriginal families live.

They pack their van every morning from the school's "family friendly room", a portable classroom at the front of the school which is a room where parents can come and go without having to go through the main entrance. Through this work, she is another avenue for communication between the school and families. She is also a parent at the school and sits on the school board, from where she pushes the partnership ideal. She has applied for funding to pay for a part-time host for the family friendly room, someone who can welcome families, look after the place and write supporting documents for referrals as parents need them.

She says the principal is supportive:

*She's great. She's very open to the partnership idea. She is very supportive. I wouldn't even try this in a school that didn't have supportive leadership.*

By means of networking, the principal has brought together quite a team that contributes specifically to building relationships with Aboriginal families. In addition to the KESO, there are the wellbeing team, the children's advocate, who in turn has a speech pathologist friend working with her, and an English as a Second Language (ESL) co-ordinator. For a primary school in a modest country town, these are impressive resources. They have not come together by accident, but by the preparedness of the principal to build on a positive culture, to recognise the value of others, and to give them space and encouragement.

Aboriginal parents say they chose the school because it offers programs for Aboriginal students, because there are other Aboriginal children they know here and because they feel safe. Some are on a steering committee that arranges the school's Aboriginal programs, giving them a sense of belonging and connection with their children's education. They regard the KESO as essential, especially for keeping in touch with those parents who never come to the school.

There are many barriers to parents coming to schools, not the least being their own bad experiences at school. It was different here, as one parent explained:

*I used to get bullied, there was racism, all that crap. Here, as soon as that happens, they're straight on to it. There's zero tolerance to racism or bullying.*

### Key factors

- Strong leadership by a principal of conviction.
- Preparedness to recognise and value what others can contribute.
- Pro-active personal contact by the school.
- Outreach by the school.
- Aboriginal person as the key connector.
- Making Aboriginal culture a highly visible and integrated part of school life.
- Determination not to allow external troubles discourage the school effort.
- Smart use of funding and external resources.
- Use of multiple lines of communication.
- Zero tolerance of racism.

### Case E

Case E is a small independent school in a remote setting, serving about 200 students, mainly from town camps and outstations. It includes a child-care centre with 2 and 3-year-olds, a pre-school for 4-year-olds, and then kindergarten and grades 1 to 6. In an effort to keep young teenagers from dropping out of schooling, as commonly happens when they leave here for a government secondary school, it runs a composite class covering years 7 to 10.

The school is perhaps the ultimate expression of Aboriginal family, school and community partnerships: it is owned and governed as a joint venture by the four main language groups of the area. It was founded 33 years ago on the wave of change in Aboriginal affairs policy that led, among other things, to the formation of land councils. The founders were elders from the four language groups, motivated to a large extent by their ambition to keep alive their languages and culture at a time when no other schools were willing or able to do so.

They call it a “two-way” school: bilingual and bi-cultural. The founders said, “We want to teach white man’s way, but we want to teach our way as well”. This remains a foundational principle. The standard curriculum is taught in English, and then the students have daily lessons in their own language. The four main local languages are provided for. Culture is also taught, embedded in the curriculum of every day’s learning.

To be a member of the school board, a person has to be registered as the parent or carer of a child at the school -- not necessarily a mother or father; perhaps a grandparent, aunty or uncle. They also have the right to vote for membership of the board. So the board is really a parental organisation. Board members also represent the four main language groups.

Sometimes there are factional tensions between the language groups but generally the school transcends that. Not only does it seem to transcend such differences, it has also become a powerful force in promoting unity of purpose.

According to the principal, what tends to happen is that one family dominates for a while and then it changes. These transitions happen peacefully. In the principal’s view, the stability derives from the enormous pride that this is their school, that they control it and that it is independent.

The board appoints all the staff. Although they delegate much of the power to the principal, the board must confirm all appointments. Staff are chosen on merit, regardless of race or colour, and while most of the teachers are white, in every classroom there is an assistant teacher who is Aboriginal and is being trained as a teacher’s aide with a view to going on further. One Aboriginal teacher at present on the staff started as an assistant, got her certificate, diploma and degree, and is now doing higher studies. Two others are currently doing degree courses.

The training of Indigenous teaching staff is one of the objectives laid down in the school’s constitution, and the board makes it compulsory for Indigenous staff employed in the

classroom to do training. They are paid for the school holidays as study leave as an incentive. In 2010, there were 24 Indigenous staff doing courses – almost half the staff of 50.

There is little government financial support for this. Of the 24 being trained, the school has government scholarships for two. The rest are funded by the school. The teacher now doing higher studies had to leave the school for two years during her degree studies because the government would not allow her to take up her scholarship while at an independent school.

Funding is a perennial issue. The school's basic funding is provided by the Commonwealth on the same basis as for all independent schools. However, this funding model assumes that the school will also receive fee income from parents, but in this school very few parents can afford any fees. When the last count was done three or four years ago, this school had more children from the town camps and outstations than all the other schools in the town put together. To quote the principal:

*We are picking up the least emancipated ones. And many come from very dysfunctional families.*

Even so, parents and carers – including from the camps and outstations – are directly and regularly engaged with the school: as members of the board, through participation in language and culture programs, and in excursions. Elders come in to tell the stories.

Every morning and every evening there is direct outreach to all the families in the camps through the efforts of the school bus drivers. The school runs a fleet of minibuses, and these go round all the camps picking up and dropping off the children. The drivers, most of whom are Aboriginal and all of whom are known to the families, are *de facto* family liaison officers as well. If a child isn't waiting to be picked up, the driver gets out, knocks on the door and asks if everything is all right. If necessary, he will make another trip later to pick up the child. Governments will not fund the buses so they are paid for out of the classroom budget.

There are also two people in formal positions as liaison officers, both Aboriginal, which is a requirement because of the need to speak language and be able to relate to the circumstances of people in the camps. The senior liaison officer explains:

*It's easy when we go and talk to the parents because we all speak language. And it helps because we're locals and know a lot of family members and half the people we are related to. I live on a town camp.*

She says about 50-plus families have children at the school, and of those, more than half are actively engaged in the education of their children. The factors behind this quite remarkably high ratio she says are, first, that many on the school staff speak language and so parents feel comfortable coming into the school; second, that they are offered breakfast and then the opportunity to sit in class with their children for as long as it takes for the child to feel at ease in the school; third, that it doesn't matter if the child is late: if the parents ring, the school will send a minibus.

For all schools, she offered this advice for connecting with Aboriginal families: have an Aboriginal person with the language; do home visits so they can get used to you; try to have the same people doing the visits so they become familiar; show them that you are here for them if they need support.

Another successful bridge between school and home has been the introduction of the *Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters* (HIPPY). This is now being run by the Aboriginal graduate teacher. Tutors take activities into the homes, sit with parents, tutor them, do role-play with them, so they know what needs to be taught and how to teach their pre-schoolers. The idea is that the parents spend at least 15 minutes a day going through the activities with their children. There are tutoring sessions each week.

The program was introduced in 2008, and the teacher says the benefits are now showing up in the classrooms as children arrive at school readier to learn, with more highly developed motor skills and understanding of basic concepts like "up" and "down", as well as letters and numbers.

Another program, *Family and Schools Together* (FAST), has been introduced to help parents develop self-confidence and the skills needed to interact with their children. The effect on one parent of merely being invited to participate was described by the convenor:



*[She] wouldn't even speak to anyone here, wouldn't come past the front gate, but now she's coming into the front office, slowly getting closer into the school, and she actually spoke to a teacher the other day. And she hasn't even really started the program yet. She's just signed up.*

*Just the invitation has made a big difference. It's just amazing.*

Parents and elders have also been drawn into the development at the school of a series of basic reading books, the Honey Ant Readers. These have been written by a linguist who is attached to the school, based on local stories told by the elders using the Indigenous way of story-telling.

The first-stage books are based on seven words most commonly used in relation to a very popular activity among all local Aboriginal people – digging for honey ants. The seven words are: nanna, ant, dig, red, sand, run, in.

In the more advanced books, all the stories have a moral, and the moral is to teach the law: for example, look after your baby, or stay together if you go off into the bush. They are written verbatim as told to the author on one side of the page, and on the back as translated into standard English. Thus they can be used by speakers of standard English and of Aboriginal English.

Eleven language groups have been involved in the development of the books, and a team of seven from those groups look at the proofs before the books are published.

### **Key factors**

- Aboriginal ownership and control.
- Strong leadership by a principal of conviction.
- Integration of language and culture into the curriculum.
- Pro-active personal contact by the school.
- Outreach by the school.
- Aboriginal people as the key connectors.

- Generosity of spirit.
- Meeting parents' needs at many levels.
- Being an agent of parental self-growth.

## Case F

Case F is a Years 7 to 10 campus of a government secondary school in a large but remote regional city. It has 550 students, 48% of whom identify as Aboriginal.

The evidence from talking with the leadership, staff and parents, and from observation, is that this is a school that has conscientiously served a large Aboriginal population for a long time, has taken many initiatives over the years to develop a rapport with the Aboriginal community, and has been energetic in finding opportunities for broadening out the life experiences of its Aboriginal students.

However, the evidence also suggests that until recently this effort has sprung from necessity rather than philosophical conviction, a situation now undergoing radical change under the leadership of a new young principal. She knows she has a long way to go. Speaking of what she found when she arrived (within the previous twelve months), she says:

*Some systems were there, but there were a lot of throwaway racist lines, a lot of talk that was really detrimental to what we were doing. "Why are we doing this for the Aboriginal students and not everyone else?" All this sort of talk. It surprises me, coming into a school that has always dealt with this.*

*So I talked about equity and the need for us to be able to service all our students, and I've really had to educate some staff about what our role is here.*

*I'd say 50% of the staff are right on board, and 50% of staff are not happy with the clientele that we have. As with any school you'll get staff who'll run with change. There has been an enormous amount of change, and I have to step back a little and let things ride.*

Among the systems she inherited was a structure that included two experienced Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs), widely known and respected in the Aboriginal community, and an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO). The role of the AEOs is mainly to cater to the needs of students, and that of the ACLO to go out among the Aboriginal community, visit

homes, attend community meetings and be in touch with the community through network groups, Aboriginal elder groups and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG).

The ACLO post was currently vacant, the previous incumbent having moved from the district, and the selection of a replacement was imminent. The principal was determined that it would be another Aboriginal person:

*I want more Aboriginal staff. The more I have, it'll be fantastic for our kids. So I wouldn't even think about giving it to a non-Aboriginal person. It just wouldn't happen. The students like to feel they're around family. They love the story-telling and the connections. It's just so important.*

*If we didn't have Aboriginal people in our school, we couldn't change the outcomes for our students. It just wouldn't happen.*

She speaks with admiration about the Aboriginal support staff she inherited – “they are just so good” – and describes the recently departed ACLO as “absolutely fabulous”.

The support staff, for their part, say that outreach to Aboriginal families is seen by the school as important, and that if you can't get out into the community, nothing comes of your communication efforts. Newsletters have little value. It has to be “word of mouth, voice-to-voice, face-to-face”. They say some Aboriginal parents feel comfortable coming into the school and some don't. It seems to them to be more a matter of personal disposition than whether they are Aboriginal or not.

Once a term, the school holds a morning meeting of the Aboriginal education team, which includes the AEOs, the ACLO, the head teacher of equity programs (who is in charge of all the Aboriginal education programs), and the Aboriginal studies teacher. Aboriginal families are invited to join them and discuss what has been happening over the term with the Aboriginal students.

One such meeting was held on the day the researchers visited the school. It attracted about 20 parents. Aboriginal students in positions of leadership at the various class levels introduced the presentations of what their class had been doing. There were brief speeches of welcome from

the principal and head of equity, and a presentation by the Aboriginal studies teacher on work she was doing.

Afterwards, the parents were invited to stay for lunch, and virtually all did so. They spoke appreciatively of the school's work with their children, as well as of symbolic projects such as the building of a large native garden which the elders had been invited to design and advise upon. This garden began just outside the glass wall of the lunch room, and many parents commented on it as a symbol of what they saw as the school's respectfulness of their culture.

The head of equity said later that while there was a committed core of Aboriginal parents involved in the life of the school, she and the others in the leadership group want to do a lot more to develop partnerships with parents. Part of doing so is the development of partnerships with external organisations such as Mission Australia, who are connected with parents in other ways but who also run resilience and tolerance programs in the school. In a sense, then, the school is creating another door through which parents can enter school life.

Other staff have ideas for introducing occasions on which the school can invite parents in for lunch with their children – “inviting the parents in for something positive, and where they don't have to make an appointment”.

The barriers to parental engagement are many, as one of the AEOs explained:

*There could be two parents working. Could be single parents with big families. Transport is one of the main issues. That fear factor: a lot probably don't come in because of that fear about what to say or what to talk about.*

*A lot many have been in the school before for disciplinary issues. So: “I'm not going in there to listen to that disciplinary stuff”.*

*And they may have had a bad experience during that time because their child may have been suspended or expelled or they didn't get the answer they wanted.*

*And back in the time when their parents weren't even allowed to go to school, that could still be passed down. And education wasn't a major priority. Maybe isn't a big priority for them and their children now.*

Fear of being discriminated against now is not considered to be a likely factor. Staff say that while the school had in the past an issue with racism, in more recent times this has disappeared, and in fact a zero-tolerance policy is now in place: if a student is heard to make a racist remark, the parents are brought in immediately.

The principal says that as a newcomer, she needs to build trust among parents if she is going to break the barriers down:

*My job at the moment is for them to get trust of me. For example, I had a meeting with a mum this morning and her son hadn't been to school all term. So we looked at the data and I said, "What can we do to support you?" And we set up a plan, and as she went to leave, she turned back and she just said, "I just want to thank you for not yelling at my son. I feel you understand."*

*What she was trying to say was, thank you for not making me feel inadequate. And that's the way you've got to work. I lot of these families get yelled and screamed at. So they won't come in. So I've got to create a culture in which they know I'll never make them feel any less than who they are.*

Q: How do you get the staff thinking like this?

*We're using peer coaching. We have our teachers go into class, we video the classes and we self-evaluate. As a principal I say, "I'm not here to judge you on your teaching. I am here for your teaching to improve." The peer coaching is a way of getting into the classrooms and role-model. We have some teachers, Aboriginal students won't even go in their class.*

She also reflected on her own approach to the education of Aboriginal students:

*I think that when I started working with Aboriginal families, I looked at the deficit model far too much. I focus a lot of my energy now on our Indigenous Youth Leadership scholarship holders, who are these absolutely brilliant leaders, and they're pulling everyone else up.*

*And that's what I want to push. Let's give the leadership capacity a lot more depth.*

A teacher on the staff who is Aboriginal says that the more the community are involved in the teaching, the more real it seems to the students. She has had a well-known footballer in to talk about how he achieved success; she has had in a couple who had been through a rough patch to talk about how they had overcome their problems and how they subsequently shook of the stereotype as people involved in crime and violence.

This is one school where funding is not a problem. The principal says:

*We've got all the money. We're probably the most funded school in [the State]. We have a literacy team, we have all this, but that's still not making the difference that we want to see.*

It is clear that while money is important, on its own won't make a difference. It is about the people and commitment and a sense of mission, as so many of these case studies show. This young principal does not want for a sense of mission:

*It's great to come to work every day, it really is.*

Q: Why?

*Because I think I'm making a difference.*

### Key factors

- Strong leadership by a principal of conviction.
- Pro-active personal contact by the school.
- Outreach by the school.
- Aboriginal people as the key connectors.
- Making Aboriginal culture a highly visible and integrated part of school life.
- Use of multiple lines of communication.
- Zero tolerance of racism.
- Creating opportunities for parents to come in and see what their children are doing.

### Case G

Case G is a government secondary school with 400 students, about 28 of whom are Aboriginal. It serves a satellite town on the outskirts of a major metropolitan area in Australia's south-east, where the original Aboriginal nations and their language groups were comprehensively broken up by white settlement. A legacy of this fracturing is that many in the local Aboriginal community, displaced from their original lands, speak with diverse voices, adding complexity to the school's challenge in establishing and maintaining partnerships.

The history of the school itself has a legacy of its own: neglect of its infrastructure by successive governments led to its becoming seriously run down, undermining its reputation in the eyes of the townspeople. In a town that has a mixture of affluent families and those living in what is described by the principal as an “underbelly” of disadvantage, few children from the former group were enrolled at the school. A cycle of residualisation had taken hold.

Then four years ago a new principal was appointed with a long and successful career of building or re-building schools in low socio-economic settings. Wise in the ways of the bureaucracy, entrepreneurial by temperament and toughened by hands-on experience, he set about remedying the physical neglect and at the same time rebuilding a culture of pride. Integral to his approach is to see that this new pride is fully shared by the Aboriginal community.

Virtually the whole school has been rebuilt, just enough of the old remaining to prompt staff members to tell their own stories about leaking roofs, freezing classrooms and broken windows. They walk through the new buildings still seemingly in disbelief.

To get this far, the principal has seized on every opportunity:

*[State Premier] came to visit our school, and I believe he was influential in our moving up the ranking and getting something happening.*

*We took federal funding for a trade training centre. We applied for a language centre and we got that. So we formed a package which has rebuilt our school.*

Language is a cornerstone of the school’s engagement with the Aboriginal community. The principal went to a departmental conference on “closing the gap” and persuaded a senior policy-maker to fund a two-year pilot program to teach the original language of the area. Elders who themselves were once students at the school are now back teaching this language. They too have history to deal with. Speaking the language was banned, and although it was kept alive within families, they say it took two generations before people felt they had rebuilt their skills sufficiently to teach it. Preservation was made more difficult by the fact that the language was oral only, although now it is being written down.

In 2011 the school appointed two elders as teachers of the language, and they started teaching it to Year 7 students – not just Aboriginal but any who wanted to learn. In 2012 it was extended to Years 7 and 8, enrolments more than doubling to 20.

One of these elders speaks of the decisive role of the principal in establishing an atmosphere in which this initiative was accepted, not only by the whole school community but across the various language groups in the Aboriginal community. The principal says his strategy has been to deal with people as individuals rather than as members of groups, and to find ways of meeting the specific needs and aspirations of those individuals.

Opening the program to all students was another way in which unity was promoted.

The school has learnt an important lesson from this: that students want to be treated alike, regardless of whether they are Aboriginal or not, in the sense that they do not want to be singled out. The lesson has been reinforced by its experience with another program, one on information technology, part of which required the Aboriginal students to be “withdrawn” from normal classes for extra tuition in the IT program. Aboriginal students began dropping out of the course because they wanted to remain with their non-Aboriginal friends and classmates.

Reaching out to the Aboriginal community has also been an important part of the school’s strategy. The elders say this is also a comparatively recent development. Part of the reason, one elder says, is that awareness of the importance of preserving and promoting understanding of Aboriginal culture has increased in recent times, and that attitudes towards this have become more positive.

*We’re very fortunate because we have people that believe that culture is important to people – all cultures, but particularly Aboriginal culture, being the first culture of this land.*

*We are very fortunate to have people like [the principal] and teachers who are willing to support learning and understanding about Aboriginal culture and heritage.*



*It's about having the people who are acutely aware of the history, but also the interest, and that they base their curriculum on what is good for all children.*

The principal's initiatives in this field are grounded in personal conviction:

*Our society needs to recognise that there is a history that has been ignored for way too long. I genuinely believe that. When I went to school there was a book called "The Past and Us". It was a red book. Year 7. The first chapter was a picture of Aboriginal people hunting and foraging, turn the page, Captain Cook. Then we did Mediaeval, Egypt, whatever. So my whole understanding of what happened in this country is all based on a Western view.*

*That's wrong. Every teacher should be trained to know more about Aboriginal culture. We should have our children experiencing more about Indigenous culture. And it's only fair and respectful that we do that. So I have a belief about that, and introducing [the language] was a step towards doing that.*

The principal agrees that he has embarked on an effort to change the culture of the school, broadly speaking to make it more open – to new ideas, to a fuller understanding of the Aboriginal community, and to the engagement of parents generally. After four years, he says, he has just scratched the surface: he thinks it is a 10-year project.

This assessment seems to be a fair one. Teacher views are mixed. While those spoken to strongly endorse his approach, their understanding of some of the factors underlying the issues facing Aboriginal people varies. A humanities teacher in the junior school becomes animated as she talks about her puzzlement about why the local history of Aboriginal-European interaction was not being acknowledged and taught. She is seeing now that it is. She has brought in elders to talk about it, and someone from the town's local historical society. Her students learn about a local government-run Aboriginal settlement, now long closed: the injustices that occurred there but also its success as an agricultural enterprise.

Another member of staff spoke of her struggle to reconcile what she saw initially as "negative discrimination" in which Aboriginal students got assistance that was not available to non-Aboriginal students, no matter how disadvantaged. She credits the principal with showing by example how to be passionate about what she calls the Aboriginal element in the school while at the same time being inclusive. He has achieved this, she says, by eliminating Aboriginality as

the basis for inclusion or exclusion in programs, and by becoming heavily involved in a range of community groups. The two she mentioned as emblematic were Rotary and the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG).

A health worker closely involved with the school, though not on the staff, also speaks of the mixed capacities of school staff to make “personal connectedness” with Aboriginal parents, who still tend to look upon the school as an institution where they don’t always feel they belong. She puts it down to lack of understanding.

By having this person so involved with the school, however, the principal has networked the school into a wide range of programs aimed at helping students in need – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike: leadership camps, disability funding, mentoring, the *Good, Strong and Proud Young Women* program for disengaged students. The school could not possibly offer all these if it were to rely only on its own resources.

The school and students also get the benefit of a dedicated person who makes home visits in her own time and also regular contact by phone, having ensured that her number is programmed into parents’ phones so it does not come up as “unknown”. She has learnt that many Aboriginal parents will not answer an “unknown” call, fearing it to be the welfare authorities.

Engaging parents generally – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – is as much a challenge for this school as for many secondary schools. It uses the standard mechanisms – newsletter, parent-teacher meetings, the website, email, Facebook and Twitter, but with only modest success. The principal holds his hands out in a gesture of openness: “You know, you can always drop in or ring us!”

### **Key factors**

- Strong leadership by a principal of conviction.
- Involving Aboriginal elders in teaching.
- Widening the curriculum to include Aboriginal language.

- Making Aboriginal culture a highly visible and integrated part of school life.
- Networking the school through a few crucial relationships.
- Being entrepreneurial in finding opportunities for funding and support.
- Being inclusive in a way that does not unintentionally exclude others.
- Use of multiple lines of communication.

## Case H

Case H is not about a single school but about a network of four schools, two universities, a TAFE institute, the regional office of a State department of education, the local council, Aboriginal education workers, an Aboriginal education unit, local industry and community representatives. The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is also a participant, and has funded a number of the network's projects.

The whole enterprise rests on the principle of partnerships – between parents and schools, schools and communities, schools and the educational bureaucracy – and all of them with the local council, local industry and regional universities.

It began in 2006 as an initiative to engage students in Years 11 and 12 who were not intending to go to university, and to provide them with a wider range of options, including school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. A senior public servant in the region, whose passion and conviction has been an important motive force behind the initiative, brought together a group of local people and organisations involved in education and economic development. Their initial objective was to identify local employment needs and look for ways of educating young people that would meet those needs.

The work has since broadened out to include a program to promote the teaching of Aboriginal culture and language, with the aim of sustaining a love of learning among Aboriginal students, and a program to provide pathways for those who aspire to attend university.

The network has been established in a regional area with a distinctive geographical identity. Its most salient feature is a majestic river, and the local people exhibit a strong affinity for place.

This in turn feeds a sense of pride and a passion to secure the future for their young people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The area also has a large and growing population of Aboriginal people.

The community recognises that in an area where old rural industries such as timber-getting have died out and where newer replacements such as tourism are not strong, employment opportunities for young people need to be found. The main centre is now mainly a service town for the hinterland. Where young Aboriginal people are concerned, there is a legacy of the past to be overcome. It was captured in an off-the-cuff remark by a respondent who said: "I want it to be normal to see Aboriginal people serving behind the counters in the main street shops."

Aboriginal elders have put their authority, energy and knowledge into the initiative. Two Aboriginal women, each connected by birth and marriage to the three Aboriginal nations that converge in the area, are the driving force behind a second element in the initiative, the purpose of which is to help Aboriginal students make a successful transition from school to work.

They are creating a comprehensive learning kit for inclusion in the high school curriculum covering 11 themes about Aboriginal culture and interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. These include spirituality, food, shelter, language, work, freedom fighters, war heroes and the Stolen Generations.

The way this kit is being developed is a textbook study in genuine consultation. There is a project team consisting of Aboriginal community liaison officers and consultants, members of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the head teacher in history from one of the high schools, and a representative of the local shire council.

Material is being collected through a process that includes a support group consisting of two members from each of the three Aboriginal nations, as well as the wider community and the project team. It provides a way for parents, students, community members and elders to contribute stories and reflections for inclusion in the kit. There have been numerous iterations

of the consultative process, especially between the project team and the Aboriginal communities, so there is shared ownership of content as well as transparency of process.

The two women speak movingly of their own humiliations at school, and yet so far from allowing those experiences to become a barrier, they instead use them to energise their determination to see that school life is a positive experience for their young people today.

Their connections with the Aboriginal community are fundamental to the success of the work. One of them said: “When we do our consultation meetings, everyone opens up to us because we’ve already got the relationship established, they know our families, they know that we’re here for the long haul, for our kids, grandkids and great-grandkids.”

Another important factor in the success of the network is the collaboration between the four high schools – three government and one Catholic. It becomes clear from speaking to two of the four – one government and one Catholic – that they share a desire to do the best they can by the young people of the area, regardless of sectoral affiliations or rivalry. They share facilities so that students from all schools have access to the broadest range of subjects available in the area. For example, the Catholic school – which has benefited from sending some students to the government schools for certain subjects – is now in a position to return the favour by being able to offer courses in a new drama centre and industrial kitchen to students from the government schools.

A further important factor is that the partners in the network send their senior people to the meetings, people who can commit money and make binding decisions.

A university that serves the wider region has been involved in the network from its earliest days, and now a second regional university is also becoming involved. In the case of the first university, its involvement is part of a mission to reach out and become engaged with the community across its entire catchment. The university’s representative on the network speaks of her own passion for the area, but says she has been “blown away” by the level of commitment shown by all members of the network.

The university's aim is to bring the prospect of a university education into the minds of parents and students, and to make it accessible, for which purpose a university college is being established in the area.

As with much of the work described in this report, funding is a perennial issue. The senior public servant who is the driving force behind the network, is always on the lookout for funding. He has obtained a considerable amount from a philanthropic foundation, and the partners all make a contribution. However, it is a time-consuming business and he has engaged a consultant part of whose job is to identify funding sources.

His approach is based on four main factors. First he trades unashamedly on parochial interests and pride. Second, he actively promotes collaboration not just among schools but among all interested parties. Third, he repudiates the deficit model of education in favour of a model that builds on talents and ambitions. "Our programs target the 90% who are aspirational." Fourth, the networks runs on what he calls a "distributed leadership model", which means everyone at the table is an equal, and everyone at some point has a leadership role in relation to a project or a program.

### Key factors

- Having a leader of conviction and passion.
- Harnessing common interests across a broad constituency.
- Making a strong connection between education and people's economic future.
- Breaking down barriers to collaboration.
- Engaging in genuine consultation.
- Having Aboriginal people with strong connections to the Aboriginal communities.
- Making Aboriginal culture a key part of the work.
- Jettisoning the deficit model of education.
- An outreach approach to the community.

## Next steps

It is seven years since the fieldwork underpinning the *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* was undertaken. Since then there have been several research projects exploring various aspects of the family-school partnership concept in Australia. Such research has been generally consistent in its findings: that family-school and community partnerships contribute positively to the life chances of individual students and ultimately to the wellbeing and prosperity of Australian society. The case for promoting and advancing the development of such partnerships is therefore strong.

If partnerships between families, schools and communities are to be developed successfully, however, parental engagement in the education of their children is essential. Broadly defined, *parental engagement* involves partnerships between families, schools and communities, raising parental awareness about the benefits of becoming engaged in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so (Muller, 2009). So the relationship between partnerships is symbiotic: engagement is necessary for partnerships to work, and partnerships are the best way to get parents engaged.

It is useful at this point to distinguish between parental engagement in children's education, and *parental involvement* in schools, the latter referring to participation in activities that take place in schools such as volunteering, meeting with teachers and attending school events (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This is an important distinction for three reasons. First, engagement in learning can take place in the home all the time. It can become part of the fabric of parent-child interaction. It need not have anything to do with school. Second, it is directly linked to a child's learning, which is known to be a powerful incentive for parents to become partners in their children's education (Muller 2006). Third, it does not require parents to overcome the many barriers to their becoming involved in school activities – time pressures, work pressures, transport difficulties, having to look after pre-schoolers.

Emerson *et al* (2012) pointed out that it is parental engagement in learning that is the crucial factor in positively affecting a child's educational outcomes:

*While involving parents in school activities may have an important community and social function, the key to facilitating positive change in a child's academic attainment is the engagement of parents in learning outcomes in the home.*

The researchers concluded that positive parental engagement improves students' academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, and that resourcing and promoting initiatives to engage parents is warranted, if not essential to, education reform and the future of Australia. These are large claims, but they are supported by abundant evidence.

Epstein (1987, 1996, 2001) described what she called overlapping spheres of influence – being the family, the school and the community – which, when brought together in collaboration, led to improved student outcomes. She also found that outreach by the school to involve parents – other than when there are problems with the child – has been important in obtaining voluntary engagement by parents. Partnerships can have beneficial effects on parents, students and teachers, and the greater the overlap between families and schools, the greater the benefits to all three (Epstein 2001). Data show a link between the involvement of families and increases in achievement by students in reading (Epstein 1991). The meta analysis by Desforges and Abouchar (2002) of parental engagement in schooling across the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia, added bulk as well as authority to this evidentiary base.

The Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski 2011) found that completing Year 12 alone has been estimated to return a 15% increase on lifelong earnings for individuals. The Review also quoted a KPMG Econtech report as saying that attainment of a 90% retention rate through to Year 12 by 2015 would yield through increased skill levels an additional \$11.8 billion in 2008-09 prices annually to the national economy. Gonski stated, however, that schooling in Australia was about more than just literacy and numeracy achievements in national and international assessments. If Australia was to prosper in a more integrated, technological and global community, young Australians would need confidence, creativity and the capacity to solve problems and, if this was to be achieved, the engaging of parents was critical. The Review noted that the need to develop these qualities had also been recognised in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008).



Programs that engage parents and communities ought not be assessed only in terms of their effects on student outcomes, however. As Capper (2000) observed, to do so is to miss half the story. These programs have wider and lasting benefits for parents and the community which can feed directly into improvement of life quality and economic wellbeing for the individuals, the social capital of community and the fortunes of the economy generally.

Social capital is a vital ingredient of a society's overall wellbeing, as well as its economic development. The Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia (HILDA) Survey, a longitudinal panel study commissioned by the Australian Government and carried out by the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne, measured the effect of social capital on the creation of human capital (Headey & Warren 2008).

As the authors noted, conventionally human capital is measured fairly narrowly by economists, and is defined in terms of formal education, training, work experience, and length of tenure with the one employer. However, these have been found to account for only about 20% of the variance in individuals' earnings. The HILDA study explored other factors that might contribute to people's capacity to earn, and discovered that personality traits – specifically conscientiousness and self-efficacy – and individual behaviours and attitudes, including being married or partnered, were also statistically significant determinants of earning capacity.

Essentially, these factors are social attributes. They are acquired in a range of ways, including by inclusion within social networks, of which family-school-community partnerships are a variety. Research by Bronfenbrenner *et al* (1984), among others, into school, family and community environments demonstrated the value of partnerships in building social capital, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The development of these beneficial social attributes is closely allied to the acquisition by young people of social and emotional competency. This is already recognised by the Australian Government and an initiative to embed the teaching of these competencies in the wider curriculum is a part of the Smarter Schools National Partnership project in schools serving low socio-economic communities. An integral part of that initiative is the creation of partnerships

between schools, families and communities, and designated partnership convenors have been employed in these schools to drive the partnership side of the work.

The success of family-school and community partnerships in engaging parents in their children's learning is well documented (Muller 2006, 2007, 2009; Wildy & Clarke 2010, Emerson *et al* 2012).

This body of research includes evidence that partnerships have also been shown to be effective in engaging Indigenous parents in their children's learning, as the current research also shows. Case B is a good example. To attend the Case B school, Aboriginal parents and their children travel long distances by bus, past many closer schools. Parents are at home in the school. They interact readily and informally with teachers. They treat the parent room as if it were their own living room. At this school, with 105 Aboriginal students out of 600 students overall, attendance is not a day-to-day issue.

Further evidence of the efficacy of partnerships in engaging parents – as well as empowering them and helping with their own self-growth – can be found in the evaluation report of the Indigenous Parent Factor program, designed and conducted by the Australian Parents Council (Muller, 2007).

It is clear from all the research described above, from the range of initiatives taken, and from the success of those initiatives, that it is time to formulate a coherent policy to advance the further development of family-school and community partnerships. The objectives of such a policy might be summarised as follows:

- To promote and increase parents' engagement in their children's learning.
- To improve school readiness among very young children.
- To improve academic and wellbeing outcomes among school students.
- To raise awareness in the teaching profession about the necessity of developing partnerships with parents.
- To raise awareness among deans of education about the necessity to prepare undergraduate teachers for this aspect of their professional lives.

- To develop a deeper appreciation among school principals about the benefits of partnerships and how to go about creating and sustaining them.
- To contribute to improved life chances for all Australian children.
- To enhance social capital in Australia.
- To contribute to the making of a more prosperous Australia able to take its place in an increasingly integrated, technological and global world community.

To achieve these objectives, a range of strategies are needed.

Thinking first about families and communities, it will be necessary to raise awareness among parents of the pivotal role they play in the education of their children, and what it means to be engaged in their learning. To this end, Emerson *et al* (2012) identified three principles that lie at the heart of parental engagement: academic socialisation, parental role construction and parenting style.

**Academic socialisation** is about parents talking with their children about the value and enjoyment of learning, creating a stimulating home environment, building children's self-esteem and encouraging them to think they can do well.

**Parental role construction** is about building belief and understanding among parents that they are the first educators of their children, that they have lots to offer, that by becoming engaged in their children's education, they can make a big contribution to their children's educational outcomes and therefore to their life chances.

**Parenting style** is about the capacity of the parents to be supportive of a child, to read, count and do other activities with their children that help them learn, and to provide a home life that is conducive to the child's emotional wellbeing and positive social development.

Parents are not born knowing these things, and schools were not set up to teach them. Yet raising awareness and developing an understanding of those principles among parents is an essential precondition to the full development of parental engagement. As the abundant research referred to earlier shows, developing a partnerships with families is a highly effective means by which schools can do this, and symbiosis develops.

However, not all schools are equipped by inclination, resources or knowledge to undertake this work. Teachers still come out of university with little appreciation of how to engage parents in their children’s education, or even knowledge that this is necessary. Some teachers who have been in the classroom for many years still regard the teaching of children as their exclusive domain.

It will be necessary, therefore, to achieve changes to teaching training in the academy, which in turn requires the consent of the deans of education. It will also be necessary to provide in-service training to existing teachers to increase their understanding of the role and influence of parents, and to assist them find ways to think more broadly about the educative function of schools.

To help families, schools and communities think about what they might do in practical terms to create partnerships, the *Family-School Partnerships Framework* is still a relevant, foundational tool.<sup>6</sup> It contains many good case studies from a range of settings to illustrate what works. For schools serving Indigenous communities, the case studies in this present report show what can be done in a range of settings to achieve similar results. The framework would doubtless benefit from being updated from the later research.

From all the research – old and new – several concrete ideas emerge:

**Outreach by the school.** If schools sit back and wait for parents to come to them, it won’t happen.

**Personal contact by the school.** Newsletters, websites, parent-teacher evenings and school events all have their place, but none is as effective as personal contact.

**A designated parent liaison person.** In nearly all the schools where partnerships work best, there is someone on the staff whose main or sole job is to keep in touch with parents. Where Aboriginal families and communities are concerned, it helps greatly if this person is Aboriginal.

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<sup>6</sup> The Family-School Partnerships Framework was the starting point for the recent Parental Engagement in Schooling and Low SES Communities national key reform project which supported implementation of the Smarter Schools National Partnership. The project collated and developed a range of resources including 15 case studies and the *Strengthening Family and Community Engagement* resource - a toolkit designed to be used as part of a school’s planning and improvement cycle.

**An open-door policy.** If parents feel welcome – in the classroom and in the principal’s office - they will keep coming back, and they will tell others how welcome they feel.

**A place for parents.** Parents, especially those in low socio-economic areas, are often socially isolated and fearful of school front offices. A room at the school they can call their own – without having to negotiate the front office – becomes an important social centre.

**Make the child the centre of the conversation.** All parents want to know how their child is going – the good, not just the bad. It is more important to them than anything else the school does.

**Be visible and available.** Lots of valuable contact between parents and teachers happens informally in the yard at the start and end of the school day.

**Make parents feel like real partners.** Speak with them as equals. Many parents see teachers – and especially principals – as some species of superior being.

**Be respectful of, and celebrate, culture.** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents can find it hard to feel they belong in a school. Language, ceremony, flags and other symbols all help them feel they do belong.

## Conclusion

The value of family-school and community partnerships is proven. The benefits flow to individuals, families, communities and to society as a whole. It is time for a policy to promote and advance these partnerships. Strategies for doing so need to focus on parents, students, teachers, principals and deans of education.

The Family-School Partnership Framework, in its current and any updated form, will be a valuable tool. In addition, there is plenty of concrete evidence and case studies to provide comprehensive materials for in-service professional development and under-graduate education. The time for action has come.

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## Appendix 1: Research Instruments

### Interview schedule: principals and school leadership

1. I would like you to tell me a little about the school: how many students it has, what proportion are Indigenous, the socio-economic conditions of the school community, and something about the demography of the school community – the range of ethnic backgrounds, the range of languages spoken at home.
2. Against that background, I would like you to describe for me the school's philosophy about school-family and community partnerships, and how that philosophy developed: where the impetus came from, why the school thought it was important, how it became established, who the important people were in creating it.
3. In particular I would like to explore the philosophy in relation to Indigenous families and communities: is that simply part of the broader philosophy or is it something more?
4. How has the school given effect to this philosophy? What initiatives have been taken? (Probe for details.)
5. When did they start?
6. What were the reasons behind those particular initiatives?
7. What have been the outcomes?
8. What is your assessment of the success of these initiatives? (Probe on whether there are any data.)
9. In particular, what has been the effect on the school's relationship with Indigenous families and communities?
10. What were the barriers or challenges you faced in getting the initiatives established, especially in relation to Indigenous families?
11. How did you overcome those barriers?
12. This study is really about learning what is best practice in developing effective family-school and community partnerships, especially between schools and Indigenous people. What would you say were the important factors in the success of your initiatives?
13. Back in 2005-2006, we carried out a large national partnerships research project for the Commonwealth. Here is a very brief list of our main findings. (Give R list of findings.) Which, if any, resonate with you as factors in your success?
14. What are the challenges to sustainability? How do you overcome them?
15. Does it require resources above and beyond those necessary to run the school without a partnerships initiative?
16. (If extra resources are required): Where have you got them?
17. Is there anything else about your partnerships work you would like to tell me?



### Elements of best practice found in 2005-2006 family-school partnerships research

1. Tap into the interests of parents. In particular, emphasise the connection with their child's learning.
2. Break down the teacher/non-teacher barrier by allowing for activities that are not directly education-related.
3. Use multiple ways of communicating with parents, but personal contact is essential.
4. Appoint a parent/community liaison person to the staff.
5. Involve parents who can champion the initiative among parents.
6. Be a venue for, and agent of, parental self-growth.
7. Open your mind to parents' needs and views.
8. Ask for, and value, the opinions of parents outside the formal school structures such as P&F.
9. Make it clear you think of parents as genuine partners.
10. Be prepared to engage in community capacity-building.
11. Be visible and available to parents.
12. Be patient.

### Interview schedule: school staff who were involved directly in the initiative

1. I would like you to start by telling me about your role here.
2. How would you describe the school's philosophy about school-family and community partnerships?
3. Can you describe for me what the school does to build and sustain partnerships with families and with its community?
4. In particular I would like to explore the philosophy in relation to Indigenous families and communities: is that simply part of the broader philosophy or is it something more?
5. How you have been involved in the school's partnership work? What has been your role?
6. What is your assessment of its success? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
7. In your view, what are the main factors in that success?
8. In particular, what has been the effect, if any, on the school's relationship with Indigenous families and communities?
9. Back in 2005-2006, we carried out a large national partnerships research project for the Commonwealth. Here is a very brief list of our main findings. (Give R list of findings.) Which, if any, resonate with you as factors in a successful family-school partnerships effort?
10. What were the barriers or challenges the school has faced establishing effective partnerships with parents, especially Indigenous parents?
11. How did it overcome those barriers?
12. Is there anything else about the school's partnerships work you would like to tell me?

### Interview schedule: parents

1. I would like to start by asking you how long you have been a parent with a child at this school, and how many children you have here at the moment.
2. What were the main reasons you chose this school?
3. Do you have any formal position here – for example, on the school council or the parents and friends' association?
4. I'd like to ask you a very general question. Some parents say it's the school's job to teach their children academic skills and knowledge, and it's the parents' job to bring them up to be decent citizens. Others say it is really a partnership between the school and the parents to do both jobs – educate the child academically and develop a well-rounded decent citizen. What is your view?
5. Do you feel this school does treat you like a genuine partner in your children's education or does not treat you like a genuine partner? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
6. (Refer to specific partnership initiative): Are you aware of the school's efforts in this area?
7. How does the school communicate with you, generally? (Probe: Personal contact, newsletter, email, website, other).
8. Is that an effective way to communicate with you, or would you prefer some other way?
9. How connected do you feel to the school?
10. How would you generally describe the approach of the school when it comes to engaging with parents? (Probe: Open, welcoming, only when there is trouble, formal.)
11. What are the barriers to parents getting connected to their children's school? (Probe on work pressures, time shortage, many other demands, lack of feeling welcome.)
12. Is there anything in particular you would like the school to do to increase your sense of being a partner in your children's education?
13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about relationship between the school and the parents?