

Theme 2: Changing the schools—a view from the field

Rupert Macgregor, A/g Executive Director, Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)

Introduction

We approach the challenges and opportunities of the “Education Revolution” from a simple, fundamentally important position; that:

- all parents want the best for their children; and
- every child deserves equal access to the best range of learning and development opportunities that can be provided

We therefore seek more real transparency, accountability and responsibility on the part of those at all levels to whom we entrust the formal education and development of our children, and seek to work with them to ensure:

- schools receive the resourcing they need to provide that access and support
- all children are provided the opportunities they deserve and are enabled to achieve their potential.

We note and concur with the Deputy Prime Minister’s repeated comments about the basic importance of literacy and numeracy skills for every child - but we would be deeply concerned if the NAPLAN results were to be reified as the primary criterion for making draconian judgments about the success or failure of either students, teachers or schools – or of their parents and families.

We would be appalled if those NAPLAN results were to be used by the media and other commentators as the basis of constructing crude “League Tables” that purported to rate schools from “top” to “bottom” – not only because of the level of statistical uncertainty relating to those raw numbers, but also because they are only one element of the total formal and informal learning and development processes that are encompassed in the operation of the school in conjunction with its families and wider community.

Not only would use of NAPLAN data in this way at odds with the purposes for which the procedures were intended – but the expectations of parents, while supporting the need for literacy and numeracy skills as basic building blocks for the learning process, extend far beyond those areas.

These wider expectations are clearly evident in recent (2009) research – as yet unpublished – conducted by Brenton Holmes via a series of focus group discussions in locations across

the country on behalf of the two national parent organisations. These extracts from those findings in terms of what parents want for their children clearly demonstrate that wider perspective:

Intellectual and practical skills are very important, but these must be developed in a learning environment that is safe and nurturing, that promotes the individual child's growth as a distinctive self-actualising being who nevertheless has a strong sense of being part of – and having responsibilities towards – a community.

In terms of what parents wanted for their child during the school years, the overwhelming concern was that their child should be happy at school. Being happy at school is seen overwhelmingly as a function of the child's relationship with their teachers, and of the leadership provided by the school principal in creating an ethos of care and an environment in which learning can proceed in an orderly, student-centred manner.

The most prominent attributes mentioned belong to the moral and social domains. They want their children to be decent human beings, people who are tolerant, and who can relate effectively to a wide range of their fellow citizens. Parents hope for a strong sense of personal agency in their child, as someone who has developed their abilities and skills, and possesses the dispositions – including a love of learning - that will enable them to pursue their life choices. Optimism, confidence, independence, integrity and honesty were frequently cited as desirable attributes.

The critical enabling role of parents as partners with schools

Just a few days ago, in his speech at the Australian Awards for Teaching Excellence, Gregor Ramsey paid a particular tribute to what he termed the critical but too often unrecognised role of parents as active players and partners with schools in their children's personal development and learning.

The importance of parent and family engagement in the learning processes cannot be overstated at any time or any point of a young person's education.

And most particularly at a time of long-overdue transformative change impacting progressively or simultaneously on every facet of schooling, that relationship of informed engagement and productive sustainable partnership with the families and their wider community becomes a centrally important driver of positive results and mutually productive outcomes.

With the parents on board as informed and committed partners, actors and shapers of the change processes at all stages from initial inception and design through to implementation and review, the processes will be more effective, the results more successfully achieved and the cultural changes more deeply embedded and sustainable.

If the parents and families are left out, ignored, by-passed or brought in only in a superficial and tokenistic way at random later points in the process, with no real input or involvement, then the very real risk is that the levels of change achieved will themselves be superficial, tokenistic, unsustainable and short-lived.

The supporting research

Research around the world over the past twenty years in particular – including action research conducted across Australia by the National Parent Organisations over the past decade - emphasises the overwhelmingly positive benefits of families, schools and communities working together with a shared understanding and focus on the needs of young people.

In 2004, Professor Geoff Masters reviewed the research to distil the factors which underpin a “good school”. He sought to identify the “characteristics of outstanding schools”. This suggested that highly effective schools – schools that achieve high standards regardless of gender, family background or socioeconomic status, have a number of features in common. One of these is a high level of parent, family and community involvement. In these schools, parents and families are encouraged “to take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting their children’s learning. Parents are involved in setting goals for the school and in developing school policies.”

In a presentation to the 2004 Harvard University *Family, School and Community Connections Symposium*, researcher Karen Mapp noted:

We found when we looked at this research that there is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and better physical as well as improved academic achievement. This relationship rolls across families of all economic levels, racial, ethnic and educational backgrounds - and for students of all ages. This is not just a primary school phenomenon. We see that when parents of middle schoolers and of high schoolers are involved in education, there are positive effects.

The Harvard Family Project research demonstrates two closely interlinked key aspects of family-school partnerships, where:

- family situation in the home supports and reinforces the importance of academic and personal learning and development and there is a mutual understanding of what is important, and a shared focus and commitment to the personal and academic development of the student. Home values and home learnings are fully consistent with and supportive of school learnings and objectives.
- families go the next step and become directly involved in provision and operation of school resources and programs to improve teaching, curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

A 2002 study by Professor Kevin Marjoribanks, head of the University of Adelaide’s Graduate School of Education indicates that if schools are going to help overcome educational inequalities they have to form strong and meaningful partnerships with parents from all social backgrounds. They have to develop that partnership from two points of view:

- what parents do educationally for the child inside the family; and

- how the family relates to the school.

Schools need to develop supportive interactions with families, with special efforts being made for those parents who find it difficult to engage with schools. In his overview comments to his research Professor Marjoribanks sets out the broad proposition thus:

It is generally agreed that if parents are involved positively in activities associated with children's learning then the school outcomes for their children are likely to be enhanced. As a result, education practices that address inequalities in school attainments are designed more and more to involve parents in the learning experiences of their children, at home and at school... (and) ...teachers are being encouraged or directed to recognise the importance of parents as partners. It is an expectation that such partnerships will be associated with the formation of more enriched learning environments, which in turn will be related to more positive school attitudes and associated with improvements in children's academic performance." (Marjoribanks 2002, p.1)

Extensive data analysis and research synthesis by Professor John Hattie of NZ over many years, demonstrates that these levels of parent and family engagement and the contribution of the home environment in forming the attitudes, values and positive behaviours contribute some 50% of the factors which conduce to effective learning and personal development. The further potential synergy is, of course linking those positive aspect to the 30% of positive factors which the school provides through quality teaching.

And so the evidence goes on. We could continue citing such positive research findings indefinitely: including the threshold work in the field by Joyce Epstein and her team at Johns Hopkins University, through to action research which ACSSO and APC commenced in schools across the country in 2005 – including schools which serve communities of significant disadvantage – and which we are currently updating by mapping how those schools have progressed and what further benefits have been achieved four years down the track.

What is particularly encouraging is that some of the most positive outcomes have been demonstrated by a variety of schools which do serve disadvantaged communities and the ways in which such effective partnerships really do assist in overcoming educational inequalities, as Professor Marjoribanks indicated.

It is for these reasons that one of the five strategic objectives for COAG is to enhance family-school and community partnerships.

It is for these reasons that the Melbourne declaration specifically aims to build stronger partnerships, saying: "Partnerships between students, parents and families, the broader community.... and schools, bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement".

It is for these reasons that all Ministers of Education in 2008 signed off on a National Framework for Family-School & Community Partnerships to provide a consistent set of

proven good practice guidelines to inform and assist all schools and families to build and maximise the mutual benefits of such partnerships.

And it is for these reasons that the Government has jointly funded the two national peak parent organisations – ACSSO and the Australian Parents Council – to establish and operate the Family-School & Community Partnership Bureau to work with schools and their wider community to encourage and facilitate the building of such positive and productive partnerships.

The challenges of building strong and enduring partnerships

Of course, such effective and productive partnerships do not simply happen of themselves or by wishing them into existence – not are they achieved by Departmental directives. They are formed gradually and progressively by hard work and goodwill and a shared commitment to and understanding of young people’s development and learning needs. They are built on mutual respect, interactive discussion, shared encouragement, aspirations and expectations.

Research some years back by Andy Hargreaves showed that for teachers the most problematic and challenging part of their role, and one for which they felt ill-prepared at the outset, was in working productively with parents and families.

Not surprisingly, in teacher research by Monash University published as recently as September 2009 some 90% of respondents, whether beginning teachers or experienced teachers, stated their highest priority – and greatest area of need – is in training and development in dealing effectively with parents, families and community.

Similarly, in respect of parents, the research shows that there are three threshold elements that need to be in place as “conditions precedent” to effective engagement and positive partnership:

- Parents need to understand that this sort of engagement is an intrinsic element of the role of an effective parent;
- Parents need to understand and believe that they have the capacity to contribute in these ways to their child’s education and that their contribution will be valuable – and valued;
- Parents need to perceive that the school (and their child) wish them to be involved.

The need to build that sort of active parent engagement from the earliest years onwards is underlined

- not only by a renewed emphasis in the initiatives of the “Education Revolution on the vital importance of early childhood and those formative years –

- but also the recent array of articles in the media that focus on children with behavioural problems and the extent to which this is being blamed on “poor parenting” and “parental neglect”.

For example, at a recent Principals’ Forum in Canberra, Julia Gillard noted the burden on schools “because there are things that should be done in families but aren’t happening in families” – and confirmed that as “a specific item of policy development, to work with principals, to work with schools, to see what can be done.”

Suggestions in the media seem to veer between:

- basic parenting programs for parents – that sound a bit like “parent boot camp”
- suspending students for up to 20 days – “hang ‘em high and out to dry”
- continuing and extending the School Chaplaincy Program – which for a number of reasons we would see as a “cul de sac” or red herring in that these externally-imported resources are precluded from and personally unable to conduct professional counselling and guidance and are certainly precluded from exercising any sort of overtly religious function so are in most cases constrained from fulfilling the full potential of such an additional funded resource.

In fact, our experience over the past many years, and that overseas, would suggest that far more inclusive and cohesive engagement can be achieved, within the processes set out in the National Partnership Framework guidelines – by the appointment of a Parent and Family Liaison Officer, who most successfully was a parent at the school selected on the basis of their interpersonal skills, experience, commitment and related personal qualities.

Additional to that, we would wish to see in all schools – and from the earliest years [and most particularly in those schools serving families and communities of significant disadvantage]:

- an active and progressive music program – and preferably one shaped on the now internationally-accepted community based “el sistema” model and along the lines of its implementation in the USA, Canada and the UK.
- An active and progressive languages program – including where possible and appropriate relevant Indigenous languages.

Unique contributions which the National Parent Organisations can make, jointly, severally and through the mechanism of the Family-School & Community Partnership Bureau:

- Real, current action-oriented research into parent and family attitudes, needs, expectations and priorities. Political leaders constantly tell us that they are doing things for parents or to parents because that’s what parents want. We have the experience, knowledge, skills and capacity to find out exactly what parents are

thinking and wanting and needing – and to input that in strategically useful ways to the decision making processes. The 2009 focus group research is a current leading example of this capacity in action.

- Development of learning materials and processes that will meet the training and professional development needs of teachers – and also to build the awareness, knowledge, skills, efficacy and confidence of parents as effective partners in the learning and development of their children.
- These materials currently include not only the expanding range of case studies but also the “Families Matter” program materials, which have been proven effective in some 300 schools in building an inclusive engagement between parents and families and their school. The particular strength of “Families Matter” is not only its flexibility and adaptability to the dynamics and context of each individual school community – but that it focuses on those aspects of well-being, resilience, social and emotional development, positive outlook and sense of connectedness that are such high priorities for all parents and families.
- Unique capacity and extensive experience in communicating with and disseminating information to parents, families and school communities in all parts of Australia, in ways that are directly relevant to – and highly valued by – all members of each and every school community.
- This includes pioneering and developmental work over several years in the pro-active use of ICT to communicate in real time and real terms with families in all parts of the country – via our constantly-evolving array of Websites and Electronic Newsletters and that make our communications not only highly accessible and highly regarded – but right at the cutting edge of international standards.

In conclusion

Our action research demonstrates conclusively that the building of inclusive and sustainable family-school and community partnerships provides an outstandingly successful strategy for achieving equity for Australia’s most disadvantaged children and their families and communities – and contributes towards achievement of the national goal of a cohesive and socially inclusive community within which each young person has the opportunity, incentive and support to achieve their potential.

As we address the challenges of long-overdue transformative change impacting progressively or simultaneously on every facet of schooling, that relationship of informed engagement and productive sustainable partnership with the families and their wider community becomes a centrally important driver of positive results and mutually productive outcomes.

With the parents on board as informed and committed partners, actors and shapers of the change processes at all stages from initial inception and design through to implementation

and review, the processes will be more effective, the results more successfully achieved and the cultural changes more deeply embedded and sustainable.

References

Deslandes, R (2001). "A Vision of Home-School Partnerships: Three Complementary Conceptual Frameworks". Published in: "A Bridge to the Future: Collaborations between Parents, Schools and Communities" edited Smit, f; van der Wolf, K & Slegers, P: at: <http://www.its.kun.nl/web/publikaties/pdf-files/rapporten/aBridgetothefuture.pdf>

Doecke, B et al (2009) "National Mapping of Teacher Professional Learning" Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

Gostzyla, E & Shiradean, G (2004): "Our kids matter: the Charters Tower Story" <http://www.familiesmatter.org.au/charterstowers.pdf>

Hargreaves, A (1999). "Professionals and Parents: A Social Movement for Educational Change". Keele University. <http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/ed/kisnet/interviews/hargreaves.htm>

Hattie, J (2003) "Teachers make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence?" Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne (Paper given at Building Teacher Quality Conference, October 2003). Accessible online at: http://www.visionschools.co.nz/assets/documents/john_hattie.PDF

Holmes, B (2009): "What parents say about teachers, schools and family-school partnerships: a report on the outcomes of parent focus groups conducted early in 2009" [in press]

Mapp, K (2004) *Supporting Student Achievement: Family and Community Connections with Schools*. Family, School and Community Connections symposium: New Directions for Research, Practice and Evaluation at <http://sedl.org/symposium2004/resources.html>

Marjoribanks, K (2002). *Family and School Capital: Towards a Context Theory of Students' School Outcomes*. Dordrecht, Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publishers

Masters, G (2004): *Beyond political rhetoric: the research on what makes a good school*. Online Opinion, at: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=2100>

Muller, D & Associates (2006) "An Evaluation of Families Matter" accessible at: <http://www.familiesmatter.org.au/resources.htm>

Saulwick Muller Social Research (2006): "The Family-School & Community Partnerships Project: a qualitative and quantitative study" accessible at: <http://www.familyschool.org.au/pdf/muller.pdf>

Senge, P et al (2000): "Parents and families working in partnership with their school: the Louisiana case study" – from "Schools that learn: a fifth discipline fieldbook", Nicholas

ANSN National Forum 17 November 2009: *The Education Revolution 2 Years On*

Brearley Publishing, London. Access case study at:

<http://www.familiesmatter.org.au/Louisiana%20Case%20Study.pdf>