



PROGRESSING PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT SCHOOL FACT SHEET

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL

Parental engagement in young people's learning and education remains important and influential during the high school years and is related to young people's academic success and their wellbeing at high school. But studies show that engagement in learning and families' relationships with schools can often decline as young people move into high school.

Schools can play a significant role in promoting and facilitating parental engagement, and supporting parent behaviours that benefit student outcomes in the high school years.

This fact sheet contains ideas which aim to assist high schools to support parents of high school students to foster a supportive environment for learning at home.

WHAT MATTERS MOST?

Research shows that family expectations and aspirations have a substantial impact on student outcomes in the high school years. Family-led, home-based aspects of parent engagement, such as providing a general atmosphere and environment for learning, have more impact than parents having direct involvement in the content of young people's schoolwork.

To encourage and support a culture of parental engagement there are **key areas** that high schools can focus on. These include helping families establish home environments that support children as students and facilitating interactions between parents and adolescents on learning activities in the home.

Understanding the nature and extent of a school's parental engagement focus is important. These questions may provide a useful starting point for high schools to reflect on:

- Do staff believe in and demonstrate value for the role of parents as active partners in the learning outcomes of high school students? Are staff equipped to leverage this partnership?
- Do staff recognise there is a strong opportunity for families to play a role in, and influence, discussions and activities related to further education, course planning, and careers?
- Does the school recognise that the provision of resources and materials that keep parents up to date with what children are learning can be a simple and effective means to maintain parent connections and prompt engagement activities in the home?
- Does the school act as a gateway towards other support and services for parents of adolescents?

WHAT CAN HIGH SCHOOLS DO TO PROMOTE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT?

Schools can play a strong role in promoting and facilitating key aspects of parental engagement known to positively impact student outcomes in the high school years. The following strategies and practices illustrate ways in which schools can actively support parents of high school students to foster an atmosphere and environment for learning at home.

Key principles	Strategies and practices high schools could adopt
Creating a whole school culture for parental engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop a parental engagement plan that is resourced and reviewed regularly• Ensure parental engagement is embedded in whole-of-school teaching, learning, and school improvement policies• Provide school leadership which is committed to parental engagement and supportive of staff efforts in this field• Convey the message to parents that they matter by including them as active partners (rather than ‘recipients’) in their children’s learning• Provide a welcoming school climate through such mechanisms as: an open door or drop in policy, invitations for parents into school and classrooms, clear contact points and pathways, community events unrelated to learning, regular communication• Consider professional development opportunities for teachers so that they recognise the value of parental engagement and how they can harness this to improve student outcomes.
Supporting parent engagement behaviours in the home	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage parents to model at-home behaviours that promote learning and demonstrate that education is valued (the parental engagement fact sheet for parents has some good ideas)• Provide education programs or workshops for parents that aim to improve their capacity to support their child’s learning in developmentally appropriate ways (e.g. family communication, parent-youth relationships, time management, learning strategies)• Invite families to observe teaching strategies so that they can assist students at home• Instigate and support parent networking opportunities so that parents can share home learning and engagement practices and tips• Provide access to advice and services for parents to support adolescent health and wellbeing more broadly (e.g. sleep, screen time, behavioural and emotional challenges, substance use)• Communicate and share student academic progress (including positive and not just negative feedback) on a regular basis with parents• Develop homework strategies (such as interactive homework) which help parents become knowledgeable of the habits of the mind that support adolescent learning and productive homework completion (as opposed to just homework monitoring and supervision)• Engage parents as an active partner in further education and career discussions through workshops, parent-teacher-student meetings, provision of written information. This could include providing:<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Written information and discussions about course choices and how these relate to further education and career pathways» Basic information about college and university entrance processes, course requirements and available financial support» Interactive homework activities designed to engage parents in choices around further education and careers (e.g. researching universities, statistics on particular careers).

Key principles	Strategies and practices high schools could adopt
<p>Facilitating effective communication between parents and high schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to build positive and trusting parent-teacher relationships which are collaborative and mutually respectful • Ensure teachers know how to communicate effectively with parents and provide professional development and guidelines to support teachers in this aspect of their role. Interactions that are more frequent and positive in tone and content, focusing on linking parent engagement with learning objectives and engaging in joint problem-solving are more likely to be beneficial • Use multiple communication strategies – formal and informal, using different channels to keep parents informed of what is happening in school and what is needed to support student learning • Provide clear and easy-to-access opportunities for two-way exchanges of information between parents and school personnel • Provide communications which are regular and timely. Specific areas of communication more likely to engage parents during the high school years include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Information and discussions concerning academic programming, further education plans and processes » Communications regarding their child’s academic progress and ways in which they can support their child » Information about the school’s program and extracurricular events and activities – particularly any which relate to adolescent health and wellbeing, academic outcomes, future options, and the maintenance of a positive parent-child relationship • Schools should be clear about the aims of all communication with parents (i.e. is it open or closed? What response, if any, is required?) • Avoid some common pitfalls of home-school communication, e.g. formal and dictatorial tone of language, communications that appears one-directional, absence of a named contact person, administrators acting overzealously as gatekeepers • Potentially, engage in more intensive outreach (e.g. home-school liaison) with parents.
<p>Maintaining sufficient opportunities for parent involvement with high schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult and involve parents in school decision-making and the development of programs and events • Sustain (and enhance) school initiatives to maintain connection with parents – i.e. volunteering opportunities, parent-teacher meetings, school orientation / open days, career expos etc • Be prepared to be flexible in dealing with parents in terms of times of meetings, locations, support such as child care, transportation etc • Invite parents into school in a non-learning context and / or to access other support services and advice (e.g. health, social support) • Offer and / or host programs and workshops related to parenting with specific relevance to the adolescent years, including how parents can support adolescents in learning.

CASE STUDY

BELCONNEN HIGH SCHOOL: RE-BRANDING AND RE-INVENTING THE P&C TO BETTER FIT THE CHALLENGES OF HIGH SCHOOL

Note: This case study was largely sourced from an article produced for the ACT Council of P&C Associations' ParentACTion quarterly magazine, published in Term 3, 2015 http://actparents.org.au/images/ParentActionT3_2015FINAL.pdf

Several years ago, the P&C at Belconnen High School was faced with a dilemma – just what should their role in the school be? Up until that time the P&C had run the canteen, but with parents moving on, the expertise to do so had disappeared and the decision was made to outsource the canteen. Parents were still keen to be involved, to help the school in some way, but how? Principal David McCarthy told the P&C that fundraising was not a priority, freeing the group to look at other roles.

“It is important for the P&C to have a clear role,” he says. “I’ve seen a negative cycle operate at high schools where busy parents can feel discouraged because they perceive that they are ‘not doing much’ for the school and once they feel discouraged, they stop coming to P&C meetings at all.”

After further discussions with parents and the Principal, the P&C decided that their most important role was facilitating the flow of information from the school to parents and back again. It was clear that while teachers communicated well with students about assessment and expectations, the kids were not necessarily passing on the information to parents. The P&C's new role was to help the school communicate with parents, despite the teenagers!

“High school students seem to need less parent involvement,” explains Carolyn Fisher former P&C President at Belconnen High, “but appearances can be deceiving. Being further along the path to independence makes it trickier for parents

to deliver invaluable input. This is the value of investing in the school community. It provides the crucial support, but indirectly. Everyone benefits: your own children, other students, other parents and teachers.”

REBRANDING THE P&C

To get away from the perception of the P&C as a fundraising body, or somewhere parents should avoid in case they were given a volunteer role, the P&C was renamed the “Parent Forum Group.” (This was formally structured as a subcommittee of the P&C). As the name suggests, they began running parent information forums – one each term.

The first forum explored the topic of the teenage brain with the help of an expert guest speaker. It was facilitated by a parent and attended by key staff who were called upon at times to answer questions from the school's perspective. It was a huge success, attracting 30 parents and generating useful discussion. Ways in which the school communicated with parents changed as a result of the conversation.

Other topics for the parent forums included:

- ‘getting organised’ – helping students plan their homework and organise themselves
- digital information and search technologies
- suggested changes to the school uniform
- mental health for teens
- a tour of the school.

The forums have helped parents to better understand their children, how the school works and how to help. They have given parents access to senior staff and the Principal and have provided useful information back to the school.

THE GET SORTED HANDBOOK

Out of one forum, a new resource was born. Carolyn, along with pastoral care staff at the school, wrote a new guide for students – the ‘Get Sorted’ Handbook – and developed a student planner. These are now used throughout the school, encouraged regularly in classes and explicitly introduced to Year 7 students.



Principal David McCarthy describes the process behind the development of this resource as “the best example of parent collaboration;

“This book was a really good example of the parents and the staff working together [for learning goals, to produce a guide for students on thriving and surviving in high school]. We got it professionally produced, our kids designed the cover.”

The Handbook, along with the school’s Study Skills Guide is provided to students in the later stages of primary school.

“So, the whole idea is they come to us with it. We are noticing our kids are a bit better organised and less frustrated because of that.”

TIPS FOR MAKING IT WORK

Carolyn suggests the following considerations for P&Cs looking to re-invent themselves;

- Be aware of what is possible and don’t overreach. Aim for something manageable and sustainable given that parents are time poor.
- Focus on what you identify as your core principles, on what you want to achieve. Are you trying to raise funds, or is there a different driver?
- The support of the principal is pivotal, and communication with them is key.
- Be open to setting-up events and trust that the rest will follow.

“If you get enough people, who all want the best for the kids, together in one room with the willingness to improve things and to learn, ideas will flow and things will come up that are fabulous, rewarding, and worth the effort,” she says. “The P&C have provided something very valuable for the school – a way of better connecting parents to the school,” says Principal David McCarthy. “At the same time the forums have created a positive sense of purpose for the P&C, and so a stronger P&C – which is a great resource for me and for the school.”

WHAT ACT PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS HAVE TO SAY...

WHY IT'S CHALLENGING...

“Kids try and keep their parents out of the loop as much as they possibly can. The older they get the less involvement they want. My P&C President describes it as ‘closing the loop’. The more that schools and parents can ‘close the loop’ [communication that does not rely on the student passing messages on], the more effective we can be to help them. The electronic media stuff helps us to do that. Previously it went home via the student or you phoned.” (ACT Principal)

“A lot of those [challenges communicating with high school students] have to do with the maturation and development age of the student that we have here. Our kids are adolescents. They go into puberty when they come to us and they’re just trying to get out of it when they leave us – they are the tumultuous youth. So, that’s difficult. And in the meantime, with all that going on, we want them to learn some maths...” (ACT Principal)

“I think there’s a cultural expectation that you contribute to the primary school, whereas there’s not so much of that in the community that you contribute to the high school.” (ACT Teacher)

“At the parent-teacher evenings, you get the occasional parent who’ll say, I really want to know when they have an assignment coming up, or I really want to know what they’re doing in class. How can I find out? That’s difficult when you’re teaching 120 kids.” (ACT Teacher)

“Students at the start of high school want to be seen to be growing up, and one of the harder things for parents at that time is to start letting go. We actually had parents last year who were not letting go, and it was socially awkward for the students.” (ACT Teacher)

WHAT WORKS...

“We post-up what the kids’ assignments are and when they’re due and all that sort of stuff for parents. We produce an Academic Calendar for the semester, and it’s individualised for every student, and the parents can get a hold of that any time they want.” (ACT Principal)

“They have seven subjects, the bell rings every hour and they get up and they move classrooms to a different teacher, etc... That’s difficult for parents, very difficult... So, in Year 7 we run an information night for the parents, but we run a mini timetable, so we actually get the Year 7 kids to take their parents around the school and show them their English class and their maths class, etc. And the parents love that; they think that’s fabulous because the guide is their own kid and not only that, at the end of that you can see that your child, “Oh, yeah, they know their high school now. Yeah, the transition is done.” It’s a lovely little bit.” (ACT Principal)

“We do have a Schoology, which is – in terms of involving parents with learning – I think, a really good tool, but I don’t know how much the parents have really picked it up. It’s like an online learning environment. It’s very similar to what Facebook would probably look like. Kids classes are all on their own Schoology page. This year, parents have had access to that at home, so they can actually get on and see what their kids are doing with their schoolwork and stuff.” (ACT Principal)

“I personally just think the most important thing parents can do is just actively be engaged at home. Knowing what your kid’s learning about. To be able to help with their assignments or just be asking about how their day was, school sport, extracurricular activities – just being involved at the home level. I don’t necessarily think there’s a lot of requirement for in-school stuff, but that’s based on my own parenting values.” (ACT Principal)

“It helps if parents can support the school in transferring the parenting values of behaviour expectations, because from a school point of view and from a behaviour management point of view, it can be very frustrating when staff and parents attempt to implement consequences, and if there are differences, then the child sees this is the family set and this is the school set – now I can play one off against the other.” (ACT Principal)

“I think time organisation helps. Some kids really need help with organisation and sometimes help with breaking down homework tasks and things like that. They do need help with those sorts of things at home. Students who have that I think do much better. Even if you think they’re getting too much help at the beginning, over time they end up being more independent and then they have those skills.” (ACT Principal)

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The ACT Education Directorate partnered with the non-profit Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT, the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, the Catholic School Parents Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn and the Association of Parents and Friends of ACT Schools. Together, the alliance developed a shared understanding of parental engagement in the ACT, based on what the evidence shows has the biggest impact and the things that matter most to ACT families and schools. The international evidence has been reviewed and parents and teachers have been consulted on what is important to them.

