Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Inquiry into teaching and learning – maximising Australia's investment in schools

Addendum – Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

This is an addendum to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations inquiry into teaching and learning – maximising Australia's investment in schools. It specifically addresses Term of Reference (c): the influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive education.

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring a quality education for every Australian child, in line with commitments by all governments in Australia under the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians for schooling. Schools provide the opportunity for students to learn in a classroom environment. However, much occurs outside the school gate that also influences student learning. Parental engagement can drive positive attitudes towards school, homework habits and regular attendance and this can enhance academic achievement.

The OECD has identified that parents can play a vital role in their children's learning and development by engaging as learning partners from the earliest age, during the school years and beyond school. Increasing the familiarity of parents with school activities can trigger greater positive expectations about their children's education[1].

Underperforming schools can benefit from extra assistance to build school capacity to engage with the parents and the community to improve student outcomes. Some parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds can face barriers to constructing a positive role for themselves in their child's education and may have poorer levels of self-efficacy. This may stem from their own level of education or be shaped by their own negative experiences of school. Language skills, confidence and pressures from other aspects of life can all contribute to weaker levels of engagement[2].

Since 2008, the Australian Government has funded the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau. The Bureau works at a national level with principals' associations, education authorities, schools and community organisations to develop and encourage effective partnerships between schools, families and the broader community. The Bureau also examines ways in which schools can be made more welcoming and inclusive, especially for those families who are currently disengaged from their child's school. Since its establishment, the Bureau's activities have included:

- Developing the *Family - School Partnerships Framework: A guide for schools and families* highlighting parent engagement best-practice elements and case studies[3];
- Developing a professional development module for teachers and educational leaders on engaging with parents; and
- Conducting a survey of parents of secondary school students to identify issues relating to parental experiences when interacting with secondary schools.

More information on the Partnership Bureau can be found at: http://deewr.gov.au/parental-and-community-engagement-program.

School, parent and community engagement is also a crucial means of improving the long-term educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Henderson and Mapp identified elements of effective practice in connecting schools, parents and communities from diverse social and cultural backgrounds,

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[1] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2011d, Overcoming School failure: Policies that work, comparative draft report, OECD, Paris

[2] The NOUS Group 2011, Schooling challenges and opportunities, report prepared for the Review of Funding for School Panel http://foi.deewr.gov.au/documents/schooling-challenges-and-opportunities

[3] See: http://www.familyschool.org.au/pdf/framework.pdf

including building on the cultural values of the family, stressing personal contact, fostering communication with parents, creating a welcoming environment for parents, and ensuring flexible school organisations[4]. Bringing positive Indigenous role models from the community into schools has proven to be successful in increasing engagement among Indigenous students[5].

Through the *Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low SES School Communities*, the Australian Government is providing $1.5 billion over seven years (2008-09 to 2014-15) to support education reform activities in approximately 1700 low socio-economic status schools around the country.

The *Low SES School Communities* National Partnership is facilitating reforms across six key areas, including strengthened school accountability to parents and the community, and external partnerships with parents, schools, businesses and local communities. Schools are working with their local communities and education authorities to identify reform activities that will generate the best educational outcomes for their disadvantaged students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students with disability.
The Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low SES School Communities Project, led by South Australia involved identifying and promoting effective strategies for parent involvement in low socio-economic school status settings.

As part of the project, fifteen schools from government and non-government sectors in metropolitan and remote areas in Victoria, New South Wales, Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia participated in the project. A nationally available online resource for school communities has been produced as part of the project. The resource makes explicit the educational benefits, including research findings, of parental engagement for school communities and assists schools to reflect on current practice and culture[6].

The Australian Government *Parental and Community Engagement Program* (PaCE) is a community driven program for parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people which has been operating since January 2009. It supports initiatives that assist families to 'reach-in' to schools to engage in their children's education through participation in educational decision making, developing partnerships with education providers and supporting and reinforcing their children's learning at home. PaCE also aims to develop the capacity building and leadership skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members. Further information on the PaCE program can be found at: http://deewr.gov.au/parental-and-community-engagement-program.

[4] Henderson, AT & Mapp, KL 2002, A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement: Annual synthesis 2002, National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, Texas
[5] Sarra, C 2011, Strong and smart—Towards a pedagogy for emancipation: Education for first peoples, Routledge, New York.
[6] See: http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Attachment%207_Parental%20Engagement%20research_FINAL.pdf