SUBMISSION TO

SENATE EDUCATION EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Teaching and Learning: maximising our investment in Australian schools

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Submission to the Senate Education Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

Inquiry into Teaching and Learning: maximising our investment in Australian schools

Introduction

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the national federation of Catholic and Independent school parents' organisations. Its core business is to promote choice and quality in schooling, the equitable distribution of government funds for schooling, and effective partnerships to maximise schooling outcomes. With broader interests in early childhood development, and youth pathways, APC is an important and influential voice for parents with children in the non-government school sector, and for parents more generally.

APC supports the thrust of this inquiry towards maximising the effectiveness of Australia's investment in school education. The economic, social, societal and personal benefits of quality education for all are well documented and undeniable.

APC has based this submission on four of its foundation principles:

- Parents are the primary educators of their children
- All students have a right to access and receive a quality education to enable them to attain their potential
- Effective partnerships are central to the success of schooling outcomes
- Active and empowered parent groups and parents can, and do, make a significant difference.

This Submission

This submission is primarily focused upon term of reference (c), 'the influence of family members in supporting the right of children to receive a quality education'. The submission addresses this term of reference from two perspectives:

- The influence that families (in particular parents) have in ensuring that their children can access and receive a quality school education; and
- The influence that families (in particular parents) have through engaging with and supporting their children's learning at home and at school.

It is apparent that the right and the duty of parents to support a quality school education for their children, and to support and engage with their children's school, touches into all the other terms of reference:

- Classroom practice is more effective if teachers know and understand their students;
- To facilitate and enhance that knowledge and understanding, school structure and governance needs to incorporate and embed specific parental engagement policies and practices;

- Pre-service and ongoing professional development programs need to be available to, and accessed by, teachers and school leaders to develop their understanding of the professional practice of parental engagement, its importance and its benefits;
- Effective teacher training and professional development around parental engagement can enhance teachers' perceptions of their vocation to teach and minimise stress.

A Critical and Neglected Policy Lever

Drawing on a substantial and growing body of research and good practice evidence, APC has consistently argued over the past fifteen years that family-school partnerships are essential.

Related to this, APC has strongly advocated over the past three years that *parent engagement* is a critical and greatly neglected policy lever.

A research report about to be released by the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau[1], *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research* (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012), provides a robust synopsis of the literature on *parental involvement* and *parental engagement* and, in so doing, invites deeper consideration of Hattie's (2009) influential research and the relative influence of 'school and home'.

Highlighting that effective parental engagement in student learning is positively and strongly associated with improvements in academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, the report concludes that resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to education reform and the future of Australia.

In view of the current inquiry note, too, that a subsequent working paper [2] observes:

> '... While the importance of parental engagement is acknowledged by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), including in the Melbourne Declaration, National Standards for Teachers and for Principals, and in specific initiatives like the National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-Economic School Communities, there is no overarching framework for parental engagement, no agreed definition or associated measures for assessing parental engagement, and less investment than the evidence warrants.
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> ‘Positive parental engagement is the ‘missing piece of the jigsaw’ in the current education reform agenda and should be progressed alongside the other reform priorities in order to maximise outcomes for children and young people. Indeed, without a concomitant focus on parental engagement, school-focused education reforms may not deliver change of the magnitude expected... (2012, p. 1)'

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[1] The Bureau is a joint initiative of the Australian Parents Council (APC) and the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO). In 2012, it commissioned the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to review the evidence on parental engagement in both home and school environments to identify those approaches which have the greatest influence and impact on student outcomes.

[2] This report is an internal working paper prepared by ARACY on behalf of the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau to facilitate further strategic dialogue between the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood & Youth, the Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, the Australian Parents Council and the Australian Council of State School Organisations.

Complementary to these recent Australian contributions, the OECD (2012) has released a significant report analysing the 2009 PISA student results and a range of parent and home variables, including parental involvement (conceptualised broadly, as per Epstein).[3]

It is an undeniable fact that effective parent and family engagement in children's learning and schooling is a critical lever for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and students' schooling outcomes.

Research has convincingly demonstrated that policies which support systematic and ongoing parent/family engagement processes and programs result in improved academic achievement, wellbeing, and other schooling and social outcomes.

Research has also demonstrated that highly effective schools are characterised by a high level of parent involvement and participation, and that the attitudes and actions of principals and teachers impact the extent to which parents engage in their children's education.

This said, deep understandings of how school communities can bring such research findings to life in order to leverage 'the parent factor' in their own context are all too rare.

After an hiatus in significant government attention for some 5 years, the Australian Parents Council welcomed, and is strongly supporting, the growing interest in parental engagement as a lever to achieve improved outcomes for students, schools and society.[4]

Significantly, the *Review of funding for schooling: Final report* ('Gonski Report') argued the case for a coherent and integrated focus on parental engagement:

> '…While the allocation of resources to areas of greatest need is a necessary condition for achieving improvements in performance across the schooling system, it is not a sufficient condition for doing so. Excellent teaching and school leadership, the ability of schools to allocate and manage resources at the school level, innovative approaches to teaching and learning, effective engagement with parents and the community, and quality assurance mechanisms are all essential elements of a successful schooling system…' (Australian Government, 2011, p. 215)

Most recently, the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) has determined that parent/family engagement and student wellbeing will be pursued as new directions in the school improvement agenda, along with a continuing focus on teacher quality. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has also established a Student and Parental Engagement Branch.

It is increasingly obvious that schools cannot in isolation maximise schooling outcomes for all

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[4] The development and trialling of the 'Family-School Partnerships Framework' across 2005-2006 was a significant national conversation and collaboration between the Australian Parents Council (APC), the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), the Australian Government Department of Education, Science & Technology (now DEEWR), and other key stakeholders including state/territory government and non-government school authorities, and school principals' associations.

students. Children need multiple opportunities and supports to learn and grow - at home, in school and in the community.

APC urges the members of the Committee to consider the evidence and lend their support for collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers and amongst families, schools and the community to be a key priority in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning. Effective engagement with families (and communities) must be held up as an integral part of the core business of schools.

Right to Education

The right of all children to education and the right of parents to choose that education is well documented in the international covenants to which Australia is a signatory, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26.

Australians generally embrace the right of parents to choose the school that they believe is best for their child/ren, their right and their correlative responsibility to support and maximise their children's school education.

Many parents exercise that right and those responsibilities by contributing to the quality of education schools can provide through their membership of school boards, parents and friends associations and other school based organisations, and through the raising of funds to build and maintain school facilities and provide additional schooling materials and resources. They also voluntarily provide help in classrooms and support to students and teaching staff in a variety of other ways.

The contributions that parents and families make to schools in these ways are not well recognised as enhancing the quality of schooling. Rather, they tend to be regarded as peripheral, if not external, to the educative process. When people talk about 'the quality of education' they mostly only encompass the work of teachers and school leaders.

Yet collaborative approaches yield significant advantages for students, families and schools, including a sense of shared responsibility, a positive school climate, and substantial voluntary labour.

Parental involvement is often used in the literature to refer only to activities that are school-based, such as attending school events and parent-teacher conferences, or volunteering at the school. Some researchers have used *involvement* to refer to a broader range of activities, with Epstein's identification of six types of involvement (parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community) being the most notable. However, in general, the concept of parental involvement focuses on participation in school-based activities. As such, it does not capture all of the parental attitudes and behaviours that can influence *learning*. Parental involvement has been shown to positively impact children's social and emotional wellbeing, particularly in the first years of school, and provides valuable support and volunteer resources to schools, but it is not necessarily associated with improved academic outcomes. [5]

[5] Internal working paper prepared by ARACY on behalf of the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau.

Parental Engagement

'There is strong consensus in the literature, supported by evidence developed over 40 years, that positive parental engagement in education can significantly improve student academic attainment and the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Australia has a strong foundation for the development of an effective parental engagement system; however, it is evident that we lag behind many other developed countries in terms of strategies and policies to facilitate effective parental engagement.' [6]

Considered broadly, *parental engagement* consists of 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.[7] It is one of a number of terms (including *involvement* and *participation*) that refer to the role of parents in their children's learning.

In the remainder of this submission APC uses the term parental engagement more specifically to encapsulate active awareness among teachers and parents of the ways that parents can effectively support learning in the home and community, and knowledgeable action based on the same.

Broadly conceived, parental engagement promotes shared responsibility for education among parents and teachers, where the learning process transcends the school environment and the formal curriculum.[8]

There is clear evidence that interventions designed to enhance student outcomes through positive parental engagement have the greatest impact when:

- they are focused on linking the behaviours of families, teachers and students to learning outcomes,
- there is a clear understanding of the roles of parents and teachers in learning,
- family behaviours are conducive to learning, and
- there are consistent, positive relations between the school and parents.[9]

The ARACY/BUREAU research report *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research* (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012) describes how the home learning environment is a vital contributing factor to educational outcomes at all stages of the learning trajectory.

It cites various international research findings that have identified how this occurs, including:

- Parents can create a home environment suitable for learning by, among other things, designating an area to do homework, providing access to reading material, and assisting with the organisation of homework and studies (OECD 2011).
- A stimulating home learning environment which consists of a variety of educational materials and positive reinforcement of the value of education by parents is integral to the intellectual

[6] Internal working paper prepared by ARACY on behalf of the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau.
[7] Muller, D. (2009). *Parental engagement: Social and economic effects.* Prepared for the Australian Parents Council.
[8] Emerson L., Fear, J., Fox, S. & Sanders, E. (2012). *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research*
[9] Ibid.

and social development in children of all ages (Sylva et al. 2004; Henderson and Berla 1994; Sammons et al. 2008).

- In addition to making learning enjoyable and rewarding, a quality home learning environment contributes to the standards that children set for themselves and their aspirations for education (Jeynes 2005).
- Parents can communicate their expectations and educational aspirations by, for example, discussing subject selection and choices, academic aspirations and post-school pathways (Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007).
- Such communication represents a style of parenting which is supportive of a child's academic progress, places value on learning, and models behaviours appropriate for achievement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 2005).
- Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data indicates that parents do not need to invest a significant amount of time or acquire specialised knowledge in order to assist their children in learning. Instead improved educational outcomes result from a genuine interest and active engagement from parents (OECD 2011).

The ARACY/BUREAU report identifies three principles that are repeated and reinforced in the research literature and lie at the heart of effective parental engagement. One is positive parenting style; the other two are briefly outlined here:

- Academic socialisation: certain kinds of parental behaviours that have a demonstrably positive impact on learning and academic outcomes, including communicating with children about parental expectations for education and about the value and enjoyment of learning, discussing learning strategies with children, linking school work to current events and other topics, and focusing on activities that build students' decision-making and problem solving skills and affirm their growing autonomy, independence, and academic abilities. Academic socialisation is considered especially relevant for high school students as it is not dependent on parents sustaining relationships with every teacher.

- Parental role construction**:** how parents perceive themselves as actors in their children's education is a decisive factor in determining the likelihood of a parent becoming engaged in education. Indeed, some researchers contend that parental role construction is the single most important factor in decisions by parents to become engaged. Parental role construction is important not just because it affects parents' decisions about how and whether to become engaged, but also because it is intimately linked to academic achievement.

Quality teaching and learning

Strategies to achieve quality teaching and learning must recognise and support the first and continuing role of parents in children and young peoples' learning and their consequent contributions to schooling outcomes.

The importance and value of educators (early career teachers to highly experienced school leaders) developing genuine partnerships with parents is an international theme:

> Teachers must begin to engage with and benefit from active involvement of parents as a 'core part of their professional calling and identity' (Hargreaves & Shirley: 2009).

> There is a positive relationship between increased parental engagement in teaching and learning, particularly in the case of 'hard to reach parents', and positive learning outcomes (Harris, Andrew-Power & Goodall, 2009).
>
> The school Principal is the single most important factor in achieving best practice [in family/school partnerships] (Saulwick Muller, 2006).
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> Parental involvement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continues to do so into adolescence and adulthood (UK Department for Education, 2012)

Despite the extensive evidence demonstrating that mutually supportive parent-teacher relationships make a critical difference, the potential for effective parental engagement policy and practice to improve schooling outcomes is inadequately acknowledged and addressed in Australian teacher training and in-service professional development programs.

In a major survey conducted by Monash University in 2008 (Doecke, Barr & North), 82 per cent of teachers reported needing professional development in the area of 'parent and community involvement'. Responses to this item outweighed its closest 'rival' (the need for professional development in the area of education of gifted and talented students) by close to 60 per cent. The Australian Parents Council confidently asserts the need for professional development in parent and community involvement/engagement remains pressing.

Teacher Training Necessary

Comprehensive, coordinated training which well prepares teachers to effectively communicate, interact and partner with parents and families needs to be offered in all pre-service teacher training programs. In particular, practical information and experience should be provided on how to effectively communicate, problem solve and conflict resolve with parents, and the specific actions and attitudes that facilitate effective parental engagement and family-school partnerships.

The knowledge, beliefs attitudes and capabilities of principals and teachers will determine in no small part the extent to which parents understand and act on their legitimate and vitally important ongoing role in their children's learning.

The initiative to engage with parents more closely and the will to make that happen must come from the school and a culture that is aware of the research findings, embraces mutual collaboration and respect for partnership with parents, understands the benefits and barriers and seeks to embed processes and programs within the school that engage parents in partnerships to improve educational outcomes for students.

Pre-service training and the in-service of teachers should draw upon the extensive research on the positive effects of meaningful parental engagement and practical ways in which the closer co-operation of teachers and parents can be achieved.

A question of leadership

Whilst a focus on attracting and retaining excellent teachers is a priority, this has to be seen in the context of the leadership of schools and the ways in which schools are organised. Innovation in schools is difficult unless driven or strongly backed by innovative leaders, committed to whole school change. The leadership and leadership style of the principal and the capacity for human resources management are central to the achievement of improved teaching and learning for all students. Freedom for the principal to express her/his own professionalism is critical.

Working from a bureaucratic model, with the principal implementing externally mandated reforms may not be the optimal way for the engagement of the whole school community. School improvement literature calls upon the principal to support teachers to develop reforms based on local needs. Principals need to be able to invite parents, teachers and the whole school community to work towards the achievement of shared mission and school goals.

Every parent and every teacher is a leader (and a model) at their own particular level, in the home, in the classroom or in their faculty. Models of leadership should recognise that leadership does not emanate solely from the principal and those in positions of formal authority. Learning communities need to be communities of leaders.

Whole school approaches to innovation and the answering of the needs of the local community are school-based matters and cannot be overseen by remote bureaucracies. Innovative and forward-looking teachers cannot practise their professional craft without enlightened support and assistance from school leadership.

Leadership at all levels must communicate expectations of high performance of all students regardless of the location of their school. Low socio-economic circumstances or any other student disadvantage should be addressed by differential provision, not used as an excuse for lower student outcomes.

Reports have shown that previous academic achievement is more significant than students' socioeconomic status. The relationship between achievement and socioeconomic background can only be described as moderate. A more important aspect is access to quality education that identifies and accommodates each student's individual needs.

Equipping Parents to Engage with Teachers and Schools

Strategies aimed at embedding parental engagement more deeply into the culture of Australian schools cannot focus on teachers and school leaders alone. If a culture of true partnership is to be achieved it will require both 'partners' to be developed and supported. Thus there is a need for programs to be made available to parents to explore the requisite knowledge and skills to facilitate confident and constructive engagement in their children's learning and schooling.

APC has been involved in the design and delivery of parent projects over many years, with its current span of activities including:

- **Indigenous Parent Factor: Successful learning in the early years at home and school (IPF)**
  The IPF program reaches out to Indigenous parents to positively influence learning at home and improve the likelihood of a successful start to the early years of schooling. The program is presently being contextualised for parents in low SES communities and for new arrivals.

- **Certificate IV in Parent, Family & Community Engagement**
  APC has commenced registration of a new qualification that will provide nationally accredited training to parents, teachers, government employees, community workers and school chaplains/student welfare workers. The qualification has attracted considerable interest from the Principals Australia Institute and DEEWR.

- **Parents Australia**
  APC established Parents Australia Inc. in 2011, the sole objective of which is 'to help to alleviate the effects of poverty and helplessness by developing and delivering programs for parents from disadvantaged communities to build their interest, confidence and capacity to engage in and support the learning experiences, general development and wellbeing of their children at home and school'. Parents Australia is a charity and public benevolent institution with deductible gift recipient taxation status.

- **Parents Understanding Asia Literacy**
  APC is leading a consortium that is conducting a major project ($500K) under the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools program to establish a network of parents who will work with their school communities to build demand for the studies of Asian languages.

- **National Professional Standards for Teachers**
  APC initiated and partnered with the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) to conduct a pilot for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) of the standards which relate to parental engagement. Further to this, AITSL has now contracted APC and ACSSO to develop illustrations of practice for these standards.

- **Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau**
  The Bureau is a joint ACSSO/APC initiative funded by the Australian Government to help Australian schools, families and communities build sustainable, collaborative and productive relationships. The Bureau presented a national symposium on parental engagement in learning and schooling in May 2012.See: http://www.familyschool.org.au/

APC's project work aims to enable schools and the wider community to share in our learnings and research, and to provide opportunities and support to develop and otherwise contribute to effective engagement and partnership practice.

APC Submissions to the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling

APC was extremely dissatisfied with the Review Panel's brief and desultory treatment of community and family engagement in the *Emerging Issues Paper* (2010), and the quasi-intellectual ease with which the relevant commissioned paper (Nous Group, 2011) dismissed parent/ family engagement as a priority policy and funding focus.

Our submissions to the review pointed to the significant body of both international and Australian research that links effective parent/family engagement in children's education to a wide range of outcomes including:

- Improved school readiness

- Higher retention and graduation rates
- Enhanced cognitive development and academic achievement
- Higher motivation and greater ability to self-regulate behaviour
- Better social and relationship skills.

Significant points put to the Review Panel by APC in submissions and meetings included:

- The policy focus in Australia for school reform aimed at improving student outcomes has centred on schools and teachers.
- The Review Panel is obliged to address the review's second term of reference, 'The roles of families, parents, communities and other institutions in providing or supporting educational partnerships with schools', and needs to achieve something significant: Australia cannot afford to continue to ignore the evidence and the opportunities.
- If the funding of schooling is to maximise schooling outcomes for all students it must provide for and enable systematic, integrated and sustained approaches to parental engagement, particularly in schools serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010, p.3).
- There is a need for an annual pool of funds to be made available to school communities on application, through parent organisations, for programs to support effective engagement and partnership.

It is significant that the panel's final report identified effective engagement with parents and the community as one of five key strategies required to achieve greater equity and improved educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Effective engagement with families (and communities) must be held up as an integral part of the core business of schools.

APC hopes for recommendations from the present inquiry which support policies and program priorities that focus on engaging parents in their children's learning and schooling; policies and programs that recognise the importance of parents' roles as the first and continuing educators of their children and which are linked to, and designed to leverage, relevant research findings.

Teaching and learning in the school setting requires a partnership between families, teachers and schools. Maximising this partnership is contingent on teachers understanding their students, their families and the broader community as well as possessing the capacity to accommodate and work on a daily basis with the diversity of those contexts.

One of the single most important factors in taking teaching in Australia to a new level of professional achievement could be the reformation of teacher education and in-service to incorporate a focus on helping teachers to understand the diverse schooling expectations of parents and families, enabling new teachers to communicate equally and effectively with parents and encouraging teachers to enter confidently into true partnership with parents.

But such strategies must be complemented by the development and enactment of engagement policies, strategies and practices which will enable parents from all backgrounds to effectively partner in their children's learning and schooling.

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