Engaging families and building home-school connectedness

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction

Parent involvement in activities associated with children's education has long been recognised as effective in optimising learning and academic outcomes. Effective, sustainable educational contexts and good student outcomes are achieved when schools, teachers and community, and especially families, work in partnership. Evidence suggests that achieving equitable academic outcomes for all students requires engaging families in children's learning and strengthening school-community relationships. In this context, the term "community" is viewed in a socio-cultural sense, consisting mainly of the people and groups, but predominantly families, who impact most on children's lives. School "communities" are diverse. Some have strong, shared cultural ties and affiliations; others are characterised by extreme social, cultural and economic diversity. The concept of connectedness implies mutual or synchronous awareness and understanding within and between members of this "community", and a deep level of engagement and connection with learning and schooling. It embodies a multi-layered sense of trust, personal and psychological awareness, including involvement with learning and with school values and goals, but does not necessarily involve physical engagement or social presence. Essentially, connectedness *within* the school context links values about learning and education with wider social and cultural values in families and communities. At its core are students, teachers and classroom pedagogy. Connectedness cannot exist without close teacher- student-relations, which in turn are dependent on inspired school leadership and governance. School effectiveness researchers generally believe that schools are only "effective" to the extent that they have "effective" teachers and leaders. Given teachers' substantial impact on student achievement, they argue that this key influence on classroom learning must be supported and optimised (Cowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, Hann & Hargreaves, 2002; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Hattie, 2003; Ingvarson, 1998; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mulford, Silins, Leithwood, 2004)

Although the boundaries between family, community, and school community can be blurred, schools which are responsive to and informed by their "communities" are most likely to impact positively on students' engagement with learning. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) and more recent researchers have found, schools which nurture a cohesive sense of "community" and foster meaningful parent-teacher communication have better academic results and higher school

retention than schools where families and students are disengaged (Cairney, 2000; Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Epstein, 2001; Davies, 2000; Decker & Decker 2000; Jordan & Plank, 2000; Simon, 2001). Most recently, Australian researchers such as Masters (2004), Rowe (2005) and Cuttance and Stokes (2000) have concluded that high levels of "parent involvement", "where parents take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting children's learning," including active roles in school governance (Masters, 2004, p. 2) are central to effective schools and learning outcomes for children.

Internationally, there is a robust body of evidence demonstrating the links between students' academic success and school-community relationships and connectedness. Evidence suggests that effective and responsive schools are generally strongly connected with family values and expectations and have positive effects for all students, but these positive effects are most pronounced for students who face multiple impediments to educational success. Conversely, lack of family affiliation with schooling impacts negatively on students and especially on those who already face educational disadvantage from multiple sources. Evidence suggests that "at risk" secondary students, for example, who feel supported by their schools and teachers are likely to perform better academically than those who feel less well supported (Finn, 1992).

Nationally, the importance of school-community involvement and partnerships is widely recognised and accepted. All Australian school systems and authorities highlight the need for strong relations with parents and communities because of their impact on children's engagement with schooling and learning outcomes. *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (2000, p. 2) acknowledges that parents are children's first and continuing educators and stresses that achievement of the agreed national goals for schooling and the curriculum requires "a commitment to collaboration" with families.

Today, most schools implement a range of activities and events to involve parents, but with varying degrees of success. Too often though, parent "involvement" is viewed as a "program" rather than a "process" and its success gauged predominantly in terms of indicators such as attendance at parent-teacher meetings, parent fundraising results and the number of volunteers at tuck shop or in school reading programs.

2. Applying concepts of connectedness

This discussion paper introduces a definition of connectedness for an educational context, reports key findings from studies on school-community partnerships and collaborations reported in a more detailed literature review, and highlights key characteristics from Australian schools that are considered connected with their communities. In building a picture of connectedness in the family-school context, it draws on perspectives, ideas and strategies from eight Australian schools that exemplify effective school-community partnership models and programs. Each of these schools was visited in the course of this project. Greater detail on three of the schools (located in suburban Sydney, Melbourne and Darwin) is presented in Appendix D. Each of these schools services a neighbourhood characterised by high levels of family vulnerability or with substantial pockets of disadvantage due to adverse social and economic factors and cultural and linguistic diversity, yet each has developed exceptionally strong home-school-community connectedness and is widely recognised for its *within* and *beyond* school capacity building initiatives. Each of the eight schools visited (the "case study" schools) is highly regarded for the ways in which it has built trust within its community and forged and sustained meaningful home-school connections that impact positively on student outcomes. Each could be described as "connected" with its families, children and communities and each reported significant and sustained increases in measures of academic performance and other success indicators such as improved retention, reduction of bullying, more harmonious school environments and substantially improved relations and collaborations with families. The views of principals within these schools, and sometimes teachers and parents, have been used to add depth and richness to understandings of effective models of home-school connectedness developed in the literature review. The three schools selected for in depth reporting in Appendix D exhibited the strongest sense of connectedness, yet were complex in terms of the cultural, linguistic, social and economic diversity of their communities.

Findings from the literature review and from conversations in the eight schools highlighted several features critical to establishing and sustaining strong school-community relationships and connectedness. These have been distilled into four core, yet intersecting dimensions of connectedness that are involved in the home-school context.

Reaching out to families,

Quality curriculum and pedagogy

Effective school leadership and governance, and

Community engagement

Embedded in the discussion in each of these areas are key issues for reflection. These are intended to frame future thinking about strengthening connectedness and developing relevant professional learning initiatives. Successful strategies are also listed.

While research highlights the importance of "communication", "collaboration" and "partnerships" in engaging families in children's learning and schooling, it stresses that family engagement doesn't happen spontaneously or quickly. The pathway to connectedness is necessarily slow and it is paved by inspired and dedicated leadership and committed and competent teachers who value and respect children and their families and who create warm, supportive and challenging classroom environments. At the core of connectedness is listening to parents, supporting their goals for their children and meeting their expectations for academic experiences and outcomes, social and emotional care and sporting and cultural opportunities.

3. Timeliness of the review and discussion on connectedness

The focus on building connectedness is timely for three main reasons. First, there is global interest in closing the wide socio-economically linked developmental and achievement gaps between children at school entry and throughout school. There is clear evidence that collaborative efforts between families and schools can improve learning outcomes for children, but they should start early, preferably before children commence school. Vulnerable children's participation in quality early childhood programs, complemented by capacity building programs for parents can improve transition to school, help close the learning gap at school entry and result in longer term social and cognitive outcomes for children. The effectiveness of joint endeavours by schools, families and early childhood centres, often with the support of community agencies and programs to boost learning in the preschool years, highlights the importance of collaborative strategies and family support in optimising children's learning.

4

Secondly, because developmentally vulnerable or "at risk" children (McCain & Mustard, 1999; MCEETYA, 1996; Stanley, 2004) are most likely to be disengaged from schooling, actively pursing linkages and building connectedness with families and within schools is especially important in improving affiliation with school, engagement with learning and academic outcomes. Thirdly, there is growing concern about the shift to independent schooling that has occurred in the ACT over the last 20 years. With nearly half of the ACT's children attending independent schools and evidence that families' school selection is based on a perceived match between their needs and values and those of the school, better connecting with families may well boosts a school's standing in a community, through good word-of-mouth recommendations. In turn, this may help stem the drift away from government schools.

4. Defining school-community connectedness

The concept of *connectedness* extends beyond the general parameters of parent "involvement" in helping children learn at home and participating in school events and activities. It embraces a complex, deep, and multi layered sense of trust, personal and psychological awareness, including involvement with learning and within the school community. It does not necessarily involve physical engagement or social presence. Concepts of school involvement, partnerships and connectedness are complementary. Connectedness embraces a "feeling of being in touch." In the education context this first requires "mutual understanding", that is, understanding and awareness of the activities of others and embraces concepts of familiarity, reciprocity, and mutual trust and respect.

In the home-community-school context, "connectedness" has three main, overlapping senses-connectedness in a "macro" level *with*, *in* and *between* communities and families, connectedness at the "micro", personal, interpersonal or family level, and connectedness within and of curriculum and pedagogy.

The first sense of connectedness, at the "macro" level, grows out of the social capital theories of the 1970s that emphasised inequalities in schooling as a result of social reproduction, but did little to change the *status quo*. This view of "connectedness" involves forging a sense of shared or at least mutually respected values and commitments to schooling and lifelong education and

building relationships with communities and families at a deep and symbiotic level (Bourdieu, 1976). It may involve working with community partners to strengthen *social capital* and build capacity within a community so that families have the personal resources to better scaffold and support their children's development and education. Initiatives within this "social capital" framework focus on building community and family capacities and strengthening community and family networks, ties, skills and relations, especially in communities where families experience significant social and economic hardships and students are largely disengaged or alienated from schooling.

In a second and closely linked sense, "connectedness" has a personal, social and interpersonal dimension and acts as a psychologically and physically protective factor. This sense of connectedness grows out of the psychological and wellbeing literature to help explain and predict good health and social and emotional harmony and equilibrium. "Connectedness" relates to a concept of personal self-worth and interpersonal awareness. It describes a sense of wellbeing reflected in significant, close, and supportive personal, family and community relationships. "Disconnectedness", indicated largely by social isolation and the lack of close personal and intra-community relationships, is considered as significant as physical symptoms in some illnesses such as heart disease (Bullerdick, 2000; House, Landis & Umberson, 1988; Lantz, House & Lepkowski, 1998). "Disconnectedness" is major risk factor in youth depression and suicide. A sense of family and school connectedness has a significantly protective effect on suicide, emotional distress and substance abuse and violence, across all ethnic and socio-economic groups. When multiple risk factors co-exist with multiple protective factors, such as family harmony and social and school engagement, risk of significant mental health problems and suicide are reduced to near normal (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, *et al.*, 1997). While the relationship between protective factors and connectedness at the personal, school and community level is widely recognised, causes of social disharmony and disconnectedness are complex and difficult to disaggregate. Individuals, families and communities that are better "social equipped" or have greater "social capacity" are more responsive to schools' efforts to reach out to families (Coleman, 1988; Stanley, 2004). Importantly, students who are highly affiliated with their family and community seem less susceptible to decreases in school attachment at the secondary school level (Griner-Hill & Werner, 2006).

6

In a third sense, "connectedness" involves connecting students and curriculum. This idea grows from Dewey's (1914) early thoughts on engaging students, Piaget's conceptions about knowledge construction, and Vygotsky's (1973) and more recent followers' work (such as Barbara Rogoff, 1993) on authentic socio-cultural contexts for learning. Most recently, a concept of connectedness has been used within the productive pedagogies framework to refer to processes of *knowledge integration* and especially connectedness of curriculum and pedagogy with meaningful, real life contexts (Lingard, 2001; Hayes et al., 2006). As explained in recent Queensland Department of Education documents, "We want to ensure that students engage with real, practical or hypothetical problems which connect to the world beyond the classroom, which are not restricted by subject boundaries and which are linked to their prior knowledge". (education.qld.gov.au/corporate/ newbasics/ accessed May 2006). Recently too, *ACT School Excellence Initiatives* policy documents have reflected similar ideas, and especially the key role of teachers and pedagogy in connecting students with learning (ACT DET, 2006, p. 4).

4.1 Interaction between concepts of connectedness

The three concepts of connectedness and the wider education and social context are intimately linked. Connectedness implies mutual or synchronous awareness and understanding, but not necessarily social presence. A family might value and embrace education and feel connected to a school without ever visiting the school site. Their "connectedness" can be embedded in shared expectations and aspirations for schooling and lifelong education and a deep cultural affiliation with learning and education. Further, the meaning and value of the educational experience can be embodied and communicated in variety of experiences and ways, including by virtual means. Connectedness is not necessarily about serving on school governing boards, helping at the tuck shop or with reading groups. Typically though, such involvement is central to deep levels of connectedness.

5. Current policy and practices

As in other educational jurisdictions, ACT policy documents promote the need for "strong family-school-community partnerships" to help students "achieve higher grades, more positive attitudes toward school and a greater likelihood of continuing toward further education" (ACT Department

of Education and Training, 2004, p.4). ACT schools, along with most other Australian schools, aim to "create communities in which all children feel accepted and valued and to which they feel they are making important contributions". As reported recently: "Where students have a sense of belonging, of having a present sense of place", they are more likely to "project into the future" (ACT Colleges Report, 2005, p. 94).

While all schools aim to give students this sense of belonging, place and future, to involve families in their children's learning, and to connect with homes, they do so at varying levels and with varying degrees of success. Many schools and teachers are disenchanted with the current state of parent involvement in learning, but too few draw on evidence of what makes successful home-school relationships to develop effective approaches for engaging parents and communities. Clearly, as schools and communities differ substantially so must their strategies to involve families and other community members. Often though, family communication and involvement strategies are ineffective because they are not sensitive enough to the contexts and nuances of the community. And communities and schools change. The schools, students, parent bodies and communities of today are substantially different from those of the 1980s and 1990s. For example, some communities, especially in larger cities, have altered completely in terms of their social, cultural and linguistic diversity.

Although many of the family engagement strategies of the past will work in the present and in the future, many won't. All schools, like businesses or community organisations, need communication channels and approaches that are sensitive to the needs of their changing "client" base. Rapid technological changes alone, plus changes to families' structures, work commitments and economic conditions require new ways of strengthening and building relationships, whether they are school-home partnerships or customer relationships. Schools that rely on communication and relationship building strategies of the past may well become disillusioned and discouraged when parents don't become "involved" or fail to support school homework, behaviour management policies and events, let alone contribute to school governance.

6. Connecting schools, communities and families

Effective school-community partnerships recognise the shared responsibility of key stakeholders- the home, school and teachers and community- in children's learning and development. When educators and families share similar views and expectations about schooling and educational futures and work collaboratively to support and mentor students and there are demonstrable improvements in academic outcomes, increased school attendance and retention. Lack of engagement with schooling and with learning coupled with poverty and/or stressful living conditions can be insurmountable barriers to students' motivation and effort, self-esteem, academic outcomes and feeling of involvement and in turn, to their psychological connectedness.

Unfortunately, schools in low income areas are generally less successful than those in more affluent areas in forging meaningful relationships with parents and community members or actively involving them in school governance. Few economically vulnerable families become involved with their children's schooling unless the school has a problem with their children, or they perceive problems with the school. Yet, there is strong evidence that reaching out to families and actively engaging with them in their children's education results in more positive schooling outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Sarason, 1995).

Generally, parent involvement with the school and with co-curricula activities, such as participation in concerts and music, sporting events, and scouts and guides relates to their support for the value of schooling (Reaney, Denton, & West, 2002). As early as the first year or so of schooling, children whose families have been involved with playgroups and quality child care and preschools and who have provided rich home language and literacy environments, demonstrate higher levels of preparedness for school (Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 2000; Sammons et al., 2003). While these effects generally persist into the later years of schooling, they are not necessarily set in concrete. Although gaps at school entry are difficult to close even with targeted early intervention programs (Ainley & Fleming, 2003), strong school initiated support for parenting and rich targeted pedagogy can help overcome initial difficulties. For example, children whose mothers have low educational levels are most likely to experience language problems that predict reading difficulties, but strengthening mothers' language and parenting skills and boosting mother-child interaction predicts improved child language outcomes

above and beyond the effect of family social status. Building parenting capacity along with good early intervention in the preschool years *and* in schooling improves both short and long term cognitive outcomes for children.

Notwithstanding the extent to which the family and school share similar views and expectations about schooling and are involved with a child's education, the school has the key role in providing curricula that build competence and capacity, and focus on students' social and academic futures. While this role can be independent of the family, evidence suggests a greater positive impact if the school and family share educational aspirations and expectations. Unfortunately, the reality is that some families will never value education or become engaged in their children's schooling. Families with multiple problems, including various combinations of poverty, drug and alcohol addictions and mental illness, who struggle to cope with day to day life are unlikely to actively support children's learning needs. Yet, their children require the *most* nurturing, supportive and intellectually rich educational environments. Such environments come about when teachers understand families' circumstances, are sensitive to children's specific social and learning needs, set and maintain high expectations for children, and provide rich, targeted academic programs that address each child's learning needs and particularly, build self esteem, self regulatory strategies and thinking and problem solving capacity.

The antecedents and characteristics of strong school, family and community relationships are well understood. However, achieving real connectedness, especially in communities where most or some families experience significant social and educational disadvantages and/or where there is considerable linguistic and cultural diversity can be difficult. While pathways for establishing positive relations with families and communities are clearly delineated, actually building or strengthening relationships with families and communities is more complex. Moving along a continuum from communication to involvement, and on to partnerships and connectedness, requires schools to pro-actively reach out to their communities in ways that are meaningful to individuals and groups. This is no easy task given the diversity of communities and individual families within any one school community and the demands on school and teaching resources.

In summary, strong home-school partnerships have a positive effect on students' learning outcomes and particularly for children whose families are socially or economically disadvantaged. Both the literature and school-based conversations stress the need to forge strong home-school communications and involvement from the early childhood years, preferably from the pre-school years. Schools that work closely with preschools and child care centres, and host playgroups or mothers' groups are especially well placed to connect with parents. Parent interest in children's welfare is generally at a peak during the early childhood period and when children first start school. At this time, parents are likely to be most receptive to approaches from the school, in a position to interact with children's teachers and to spend time with children. In most cases, parents bring children to school and take them home.

Principals, school management teams, and classroom teachers have clear but complementary roles in establishing and sustaining supportive school and classroom environments, and meaningful connections within curricula (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Davies, 2006; Lingard, 2000; Rowe, 2004), as well as with families. Where schools and communities are in broad agreement about social values and educational aspirations, building trust and positive relationships is relatively straightforward although no less resource intensive. It is much more difficult though to facilitate outreach and connections in communities where families are struggling to overcome disadvantages associated with unemployment, family discord and ill-health. Moreover, what does work can be difficult to implement and carry through given schools' limited resources and competing demands on these resources.

7. Dimensions of connectedness and strategies for building connectedness

This section highlights four major, but overlapping dimensions of connectedness derived from the literature and from the perspectives and strategies from within the eight Australian schools visited. It outlines a range of ideas and issues and complementary strategies that have been demonstrably successful in building and sustaining strong and effective school-community connectedness in schools that service families with a range of risk factors and particularly, unemployment, low levels of education, high mobility, and socio-cultural diversity. In each case schools' strategies for engaging families have led to high levels of school-community

connectedness and improved outcomes for children in the light of school and/or jurisdictional specific goals.

The rationale for exploring approaches and strategies in Australian schools with strong school-family links was to illustrate the extent to which theoretical and evidence-based perspectives drawn from the literature have been applied and adapted to local contexts. Appendix A contains details of the methodology for this investigation. While the eight schools visited were unique in terms of their location and student bodies, their communities or substantial parts of them were characterised by a range of well recognised risk factors- but particularly low incomes, unemployment, and significant numbers of children living in single parent households. Some schools also had high levels of family mobility and a significant or majority enrolment of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, including refugees and recent arrivals, and Indigenous children.

Four main, but overlapping dimensions of engagement stand out as effective in building school-community connectedness.

Reaching out to families

Respecting, valuing and embracing family and cultural traditions, and pro-actively communicating with families by genuinely welcoming them into the school, building their trust, listening to their views and capitalising on their values and strengths,

Quality teaching

Teacher commitment, sensitivity and competence and high and consistent expectations for students. Rich, targeted curriculum and pedagogy personalised to students' learning needs with a strong focus on academic outcomes and especially literacy and numeracy

Effective school leadership and governance

Inspirational, distributed school leadership with strong democratic governance and strong support for rich, meaningful pedagogies.

Community engagement

Forging strong, productive goal-directed relationships with community members and organisations to complement and support school initiatives and services.

No one strategy stands alone. Effective schools use complementary strategies to connect with their communities. Each of these strategies contributes to or draws on one or more of the three intersecting definitions of connectedness described earlier and played out in an educational context.

7.1 Reaching out to families

At the core of productive, collaborative relations between home and school are shared expectations and values about children's development and learning and robust social networks and relationships that connect people within communities, including with their schools. Families must first value educational intrinsically and/or know and trust the school if they are to feel a sense of connectedness to their children's education. Where intrinsic valuing of education and schooling is not embedded culturally, initiating trust-building and then scaffolding strong, positive and intersecting interpersonal relationships with teachers and schools requires an explicit and concerted effort. Trust can be difficult to achieve, especially in traditionally "hard-to-reach" communities with little history of educational success and a general suspicion of "authority" and authority figures. But, it is this trust that provides the foundation for involvement, collaboration and later, connectedness (Coleman, 1987; Epstein, 2001; Warren, 2005).

As indicated in the literature and confirmed in discussions within case study schools, parents generally want the best for their children and want to understand what children are learning at school and how to help and support them.

A major barrier in building close relationships with families is that schools and communities are in a constant state of evolution. They don't stand still. Families, teachers and communities change constantly. In some case study schools, between 25% and 50% of staff were replaced each year and many families were transient. These patterns of change and diversity mean that different family engagement and involvement strategies work for different schools, communities and

13

families and that out reach efforts must be on-going. Identifying and implementing the right combinations for each context can be challenging, but as emerged from the literature and in school-based conversations there was a set of core principles that crossed states, social and cultural boundaries. These included:

Valuing and respecting family diversity, strengths and uniqueness

Developing trust with individual families

Listening to families' and respecting and valuing their input on educational needs and expectations

Communicating regularly with families about their children and children's learning progress

7.1.1 Building trusting, personal relationships with families

The strongest view to emerge was the need to understand, value, respect and listen to families. Families' strengths and cultural practices provide the key plank on which to build trust and personal relationships. Inevitably, family beliefs and practices are diverse and may be different from those in the wider society, in teachers' homes and communities, or in the school, but they need to be valued and harnessed as "starting point" and as a school and classroom resource.

While educators are often quick to label families as "the problem" in building productive home-school relations, families have common goals and dreams for children and want them to be successful. All families and communities are configured differently, but they all (except the most dysfunctional) care about children and are potentially valuable resources for schools. They want their children to like school, work hard, do well, gain secure worthwhile employment and become responsible citizens and family members (Epstein, 2001; Cairney, 2000; Hayes et al, 2006; Sarra, 2006; Sheldon, Clark, & Williams, 2001; Volk & Long, 2005).

It was clear from the research and from conversations in schools that "meaningful" communications and relationships with families were at the core of connectedness between schools, parents and communities. But, first, schools and teachers needed to understand the contexts in which students lived, worked and played. In the ACT, as elsewhere in Australia,

14

teachers working in economically vulnerable communities tend to live outside the area and so have little affiliation with the lives of students and their families beyond school. And while this is not surprising, this lack of familiarity hampers communication.

Developing an understanding of the backgrounds, languages, religions, and cultures of families provides a sound basis for developing programs that are more closely aligned to children's needs. Lack of affinity with families' perspectives on child rearing and education tends to foster curricula and pedagogies that alienate children and their families. All sources stressed that building trust and getting to know families was the basis for crafting meaningful curricula and pedagogies. And as stressed in the literature, this model positions teachers as a *bridge* between the child and family's world and the world of the school and classroom (Epstein, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Hayes et al., 2006; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1994; Volk & Long, 2005).

7.1.2 Strategies to engage families

The following strategies or combinations of strategies were identified as central to developing trust, understanding cultural nuances and facilitating communications with families. Overwhelmingly, observations and conversations in case study schools conveyed the sense that families were genuinely welcomed and valued. Principals and teachers actively and explicitly initiated and sustained communication with families on a daily basis or at least weekly. They were highly visible around the school and overtly welcoming, initiating conversations with parents and with children. All principals stressed the importance of knowing *each* family and making each family feel welcome and accepted. They got to know families by a combination of daily contact at children's arrival and departure, opening school facilities to the community, and regular involvement of parents in school events, including at times that were convenient to working parents. In each case principals and others indicated that while these "initiatives" were integral to the day-to-day operations of their schools and may have appeared "seamless" they were resource intensive and relied extensively on staff commitment to families and children, good will and sense of wanting to "make a difference". Most importantly, principals indicated that close contact with families prevented or reduced parental conflict. Knowing each or most parents personally and talking with them on a regular basis ensured they were generally comfortable and

familiar with school goals and procedures. This had "dramatically reduced" the instances of parents' conflict with the school.

A highly visible principal, school leadership and teaching team. Principal and teachers are highly visible in the morning and afternoon to greet children and their parents and speak informally with them. In one school the principal welcomed all parents at the gate each morning as they dropped children at school

Obvious presence of the principal in and around the school in classrooms and play ground during the school day

Regular informal teacher-parent conversations and meetings, for example, in the morning before school and after school

Regular, formal teacher-parent meetings including an "interview" before school starts

Regular formal and informal communication between teachers and parents on a weekly, and sometimes, daily basis. Communication was typically through a written notes, emails, phone calls and face-to-face conversations. Schools extended explicit invitations to parents to participate in events and regular activities such as school assemblies, award presentations, especially where their child was involved

Provision of a "parents' room" in which parents can meet on an informal basis each day. Refreshments (tea and coffee) are available. Some schools had specially designated spaces for this purpose; most used multi-function spaces such as school halls; one used its staff room.

Regular social activities for families such as discos, bush dances, and sausage sizzles, linked to school events, not funding raising

Providing services such as clothing and toy "swap shops"

7.1.3 What wasn't mentioned?

Reflecting on conversations with stakeholders, what wasn't mentioned in the quest to better engage families was perhaps as important as what was. And the one thing that stood out as being absent from the list of effective strategies for building trust and communicating with families was the formal school newsletter, the Parent and Friends committee (or equivalent), and

participation in the School Board (or equivalent). Building trust and communicating with families in a sustained and meaningful way involved a much more personalised nexus between the child, teacher, family and school. In each case schools had formal newsletters and they played a key role in communicating with families, but engaging families in a meaningful way, especially traditionally "hard-to-reach" families required a much more personalised approach.

7.2 Quality teaching. Personalising curriculum and pedagogy

The second key dimension in building school-community connectedness is the effectiveness of the principal and teaching staff in first, "reaching out to families" as described above, and secondly, in using understandings and information built during this process to enrich and personalise learning for students through well developed curriculum and pedagogical knowledge. Principals and teachers have twin roles in forging trusting and productive relations with parents and carers *and* building pedagogies that improve educational outcomes for students. Central to any successful collaboration, connection, engagement or partnership is the student. All schools serve children and families and students link members of each group or community to each other. "Students are the actors and contributors, not bystanders or recipients, in the communications, activities, investments, decisions, and other connections" between schools, family and communities" (Epstein, 2001, p. 4).

There is a growing consensus that curriculum and pedagogy must better connect with students and their families and home cultures. They must be empowering and inclusive which implies as a minimum, that teachers must have well developed understandings of children's development and learning, and of curriculum and pedagogy and then apply this knowledge to the needs of learners in their classrooms. As highlighted in the literature review and confirmed in conversations within case study schools, skilled, caring and professional teachers are central to strong home-school partnerships. Because individual teachers hold the key to developing and delivering effective programs that improve student outcomes, investments in teacher quality, including professional learning, are paramount (Crowther *et al.* 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2003; Ingvarson, 2003; Rowe, 2004).

7.2.1 Teacher effectiveness

At the core of school effectiveness is teacher effectiveness. Extensive research over the last twenty years or so, suggests that regardless of student background teacher quality impacts significantly on educational outcomes for students and that enhanced student learning is strongly associated with teacher knowledge and skill (Hattie, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingvarson, 2003; Hattie et al., 1995; Hattie, Biggs & Purdie, 1996; Monk, 1992). And here, both content knowledge and teaching skills, together with personal characteristics such as warmth, sensitivity, and empathy are implicated. Too often though, discussions about improving pedagogy and school effectiveness ignore the issue of the quality of *teaching* and *learning* in the classroom.

Listening to students' voices about teacher effectiveness is enlightening and remarkably consistent with other evidence on what makes an effective teacher. Writing in the NSW *Review of Teacher Education* Ramsey (2000, p. 12) indicated that students want their teachers to:

- know and understand their subject(s);
- treat each student as an individual;
- make learning the core of what happens in the classroom; and
- manage distractions that disrupt and prevent learning.

More recently, after synthesising extensive research on student perspectives of teacher effectiveness, Rowe (2005) said that students want teachers who "care" about them and "encourage" them, "know what they are doing, are enthusiastic about what they teach, ... share ... their enjoyment of learning" and "are fair".

Conversations within case study schools illustrated vividly the importance of teacher effect on student achievement. Principals highlighted the key impact of teacher dedication and pedagogical skill in fostering learning for all children, but especially the most vulnerable. This need for a combination of teacher effectiveness and parent involvement helps explain why home-school involvement initiatives that focus mainly on improving communication *with* parents and bringing them into the school, rarely establish deeper level, multilayered connections that impact

positively on student learning outcomes (Haghighat, 2005). With evidence pointing to approximately half of the variation in the students' academic performance related to classroom contexts, and about 40% due to either variation associated with students themselves, family background or to random influences (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000), the case for improving teacher quality and pedagogy to boost students' learning outcomes has never been stronger.

Classroom teachers have a substantial effect on student achievement, with especially large effects on mathematics and reading. Critically, the largest teacher effects are in schools located in economically disadvantaged areas. While some teacher personal characteristics might be innate, communication skills, content knowledge and pedagogic skills are acquired through initial teacher preparation courses and on-going professional learning. Confirming the positive effects of teacher competence, conversations within schools highlighted the importance of pedagogical practices in boosting learning. It was widely recognized that educational effectiveness in the school sector is underpinned by rich, well planned learning experiences that are geared to children's learning needs and especially in the areas of literacy and numeracy. In turn, appropriate pedagogies are linked to competent, caring teachers. Most principals in case study schools indicated that working effectively with children in their settings required the most competent teachers with the greatest sensitivity, experiences and commitment.

All data from the case study schools highlighted the key role of classroom teachers, supported by the principal and executive staff, in connecting with students and families. Principals indicated that regular and personal communication with families convinces parents that teachers are interested in their child and that building personal relationships with parents at the classroom level is most likely to engage those who are traditionally distanced from schooling. Establishing any meaningful relationship, in any context, requires considerable effort and negotiation, and more so when there are well established barriers to communication and an often deeply felt distrust. *But*, regardless of the extent of parent involvement in school events, it was stressed that unless teachers embraced responsive and personally targeted pedagogies at the classroom level, there was unlikely to be any real improvements in students' achievement or any real sense of "connectedness".

7.2.2 Closing the gap

The issue of obtaining more equitable educational outcomes for all children, or "closing the achievement gap", is a major one for schools and education systems. There is a substantial and well documented developmental range apparent in the first year of school that persists and sometimes grows through primary school and into high school. This achievement "gap" is related to a combination of chronological age, social and cognitive maturity and to experiences both at home and in child care and preschool settings. In the ACT, as elsewhere, there is evidence of considerable variation in children's social and cognitive development at school entry. ACT data on entry level variations from PIPs assessments are being confirmed by data drawn from the *Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)*. The AEDI is a population based profiling tool that identifies communities in which young children are vulnerable across developmental domains at the start of school. In the Gungahlin area for example (the only ACT region included in the first wave of *Australian Early Development Index* profiling) community-linked differences in early competence were marked. In Ngunnawal nearly one quarter of children (23.3%) were considered vulnerable on more than one developmental domain at the start of school. In Amaroo only 9.2% of children were identified as similarly vulnerable (Centre for Community and Child Health, 2005, pp. 14-15). As yet, no other ACT based AEDI information is available, however, teacher experience and classroom-based early assessment tools and profiles show a similarly large developmental spread across significant learning domains and a clustering of disadvantage in particular communities or community pockets.

These wide developmental ranges in the first year of schooling highlight the importance of ensuring that school-initiated strategies to better engage families with their children and with learning are genuine and effective. As Professor Barry McGaw said recently: At present, "what children go to school with determines what they leave school with...The poorest students lag behind the richest students by three years at the age of 15" (*The Australian*, March 23rd, 2006, p. 4). Masters and Forster (2005) say that this academic achievement gap can be a big as six years by the end of secondary school. This must change.

The importance of rich, elaborated learning environments has been highlighted in several studies (Mosteller, Light, & Sachs, 1996; Pramling, 1996). The Australian literacy focused work of Glynn

et al., (2000), Luke (2000), Lawson (2000), and Cairney and Munsie (1995) has demonstrated how explicit pedagogies and culturally sensitive and targeted practices can bridge the gaps between home and school literacies and to improve literacy outcomes for students. Similarly in New Zealand, the Competent Children study has illustrated the very strong association between effective teaching in the early childhood years and later language and literacy competency. Regrettably, but not surprisingly, poor literacy environments within early childhood centres are linked to poorer literacy outcomes for children. By the time children were aged 12, the effects of poor quality early childhood experiences were still impacting on literacy and mathematics competency (Wylie & Thompson, 2003; Wiley, 2004). Similar links between quality of staff literacy knowledge and outcomes for children have been found in Australia (Makin et al., 2000; Rabin et al., 2001). Encouragingly, targeted professional development seems to improve teachers' capacity to create richer literacy and print environments (Blenkin & Hutchin, 1998; Neuman, 1999).

Recent studies focusing specifically on pedagogic knowledge in early learning domains have broadened the knowledge base about the impact of quality and children's developmental gains. In each case, researchers note that quality, as reflected in rich, stimulating learning environments is compromised when staff have inadequate or incorrect content knowledge, especially in literacy, science and mathematics. As highlighted in the literature review, educators with inadequate knowledge miss opportunities to scaffold learning and extend children's thinking and problem-solving.

The message is clear. A good start complemented by effective teaching in rich learning environments helps close the achievement equity gap.

7.2.3 Strengthening connections through ICTs
Especially important in strengthening pedagogies is harnessing the power of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). There is powerful evidence that leveraging digital tools facilitates pedagogical best practice and can be successful in engaging students and improving educational outcomes, especially amongst the most alienated students.

A number of researchers (Findlay, Fitzgerald & Hobby, 2004; Elliott, 2004a, 2004b; Elliott, Findlay, Fitzgerald & Forster, 2004) have argued that as well as being powerful learning tools, students *want* to use digital technologies because they are central to *their* cultures. Frequently though, they don't have ready classroom access to ICTs. Despite their potential to enhance learning and to connect people with one another, relatively few schools and classrooms integrate digital technologies across the curriculum in meaningful ways to support learning and connect with students. This suggests both a lack of understanding of students' worlds and of the need to build pedagogies that extend and challenge young people's thinking. In the ACT as elsewhere, students in disadvantaged communities tend to have fewer opportunities to use ICTs, both at home and school.

The importance of developing ICT competence through targeted ICT teaching and through information management, knowledge creation and pedagogical support across the curriculum is well accepted. ICT inequalities are powerful reflectors of income differentiation and socio-economic disadvantage (Cisler, 2000). How schools and communities deal with the equity issues presented by unequal access to digital hardware and more importantly to economically linked disparities in students' knowledge and communication skills is shaping to be a major challenge for schools who seek to connect with students and improve learning outcomes (Shaddock et al., 2006).

Although ICT access issues are important, today's discussions about the "digital divide" are most acutely focussed on the knowledge gap caused by the absence of cognitive skills, including literacy, necessary to operate successfully in a knowledge rich worlds. ICT support for students involves more than providing the technology and sourcing Internet based information. Inspired school leadership and teacher commitment and expertise and plus thoughtful, visionary policy, curriculum and pedagogy are essential to optimise learning outcomes (Elliott, Findlay, Fitzgerald, & Forster, 2004; Maushak, Kelley & Bloggett, 2001; Moyle, 2006; Schiller, 2003). Recognition that cognitive skills such literacy and problem-solving are critical to functioning in a global community increasingly dependent on IT, but that schools have generally not yet embraced ICTs across the curriculum, has intensified focus on ICTs as motivating and empowering force.

Speaking about Australian schools recently, Professor Brian Caldwell (2005) said:

Our schools are ill-suited to an era of personalised learning, flexible use of facilities and rapidly changing technology. We are wedded to a standard comprehensive one-size-fits-all design when specialist facilities are now required.

This must change if today's pedagogies are to resonate with students and result in intellectual and social outcomes that lead to deep knowledge and understanding, elaborated communications, problem solving and higher order thinking, cultural and intercultural awareness, skills, and responsible citizenship (Caldwell, 2005; Crowther et al., 2002; Hayes et al, 2006).

7.2.4 Strategies to optimise curriculum and pedagogy

Conversations within the case study schools indicated a mix of some, most or all of the following strategies to optimise learning environments:

Teachers ensured clear goals for every child, strong assessment for learning, follow-up and reporting policies, and that every child met classroom and personal goals.

Teachers take "personal" responsibility for children's learning and learning outcomes in their classrooms.

Schools ensured that no child slipped through "the gap" and every child was provided with a meaningful learning program.

On-going monitoring of children's learning with strong assessment *for* learning to inform learning directions and requests for additional learning support.

Strong, targeted literacy and numeracy programs geared to the needs of individual students, often with specialist teacher help, literacy tutor volunteer schemes, peer mentoring, and community support such as speech therapists.

Teacher involvement in school governance and decision making, but with clear roles and responsibilities.

Teachers who go the "extra mile" to make learning meaningful and enjoyable and ensure that each and every child has a program to suit his or her learning needs.

Targeting families in the preschool years and providing "transition to school" (not just one off school visits) programs and services such as playgroups and mothers groups.

Active links and collaborations and shared activities (eg, visiting performers) with relevant preschools and child care centres.

Higher than usual involvement in teacher professional learning and active support and encouragement for teacher participation.

School support for teacher involvement in host of co-curricula activities outside school.

Strong, close communication with parents *about* curriculum and their children's learning promoted first by a face-to-face meeting early in the year and maintained by regular communication via personal letters/notes and/or emails, regular invitations to classroom events, informal conversations with parents at classroom and school events and at morning drop offs and afternoon pickup and regular formal parent-teacher meetings.

Teacher initiated (and principal supported) school and classroom events such as displays of work, regular presentations linked to students' day to day learning, and concerts and performances.

Whole school or group activities that involve all and/or groups of children such as cultural dance groups, plays, bands, choirs, and concerts.

Use of community volunteers with special skills and interests to support teaching staff.

Regular communication of *explicit* information to parents about school expectations and activities, assessment and children's day-to-day learning.

Involvement of *all* parents in conversations about the learning and assessment program in the classroom and specifically for their child and expectations of the school and classroom.

Established routines of regular phone calls (weekly or fortnightly) to parents and sending regular personal notes (weekly or fortnightly) to report on classroom activities and children's learning and to seek parent support and involvement. Sharing positive feedback about children.

Establishing programs to actively increase school attendance. Checking up on children who are not at school. Following up with families when children are absent. Actively working with social service agencies to increase school attendance.

7.2.5 "Enrichment" activities

Each of the case study schools provided a range of "enrichment" activities that aimed to engage and connect students. They were exceptionally innovative in harnessing funding and other resourcing opportunities to enrich children's learning environments, including creative and cultural activities, problem-solving workshops, science and environmental activities, gardening and languages teaching. For example:

Art classes and sponsored events including quilt making, outdoor sculptures.

Gardening. Growing vegetables, making Australian native gardens

Caring for the environment including areas under threat

Pets and animals. Housing and caring for animals

Music. Choirs, bands, music and dance activities

Chess clubs, scrabble and similar clubs or groups

Drama clubs, debating

In the case of activities that involved parents, conversations in schools stressed the importance of listening to parents' timing preferences and then scheduling activities at parent, carer and family-friendly times. Clearly, as many teachers also have home and family commitments of their own, event scheduling can involve some negotiation. However, scheduling all events in school hours disadvantages many parents who work. Lack of flexibility in working arrangements is most common in economically vulnerable areas. Several schools reported that early evening activities were most usually effective for working parents but that they tried to stagger activities so that working and non working families had good opportunity to participate in school events. Traditionally, working parents, especially fathers, have missed out on children's school activities because they are scheduled during typical work hours.

7.2.6 Staffing and professional learning

Typically, resources and funding for these enrichment activities came from a combination of special grants sourced by the principal and teachers, volunteer activities, parent fund raising and teacher initiatives and effort. All principals credited the success of these enrichment activities and their out-reach activities to teachers' dedication and initiative. They commented on the ways teachers in their school "made things happen" by consistently performing "above and beyond the call of duty."

While individual schools are affected by teacher supply and demand fluctuations beyond their control, and attracting quality teachers to the most disadvantaged schools is challenging, at least two of the schools included in the case studies, and located in the most disadvantaged communities, had become "schools of choice" for a number of teachers. Although schools in traditionally "disadvantaged areas" are notoriously "hard-to-staff" because of their "difficult" students and families, these schools' reputation for inspirational and democratic leadership, commitment to students and pleasant, congenial work environments had become popular

employment options. Teachers actively sought to work at these schools for the personal satisfaction, educational and professional development opportunities they provided rather than convenience to home or other default options.

All schools mentioned the key role of strategic and on-going professional development to help teachers keep up to date with educational developments and to build the skills and strategies needed to support children and families with unique needs. Schools reported "higher than usual" engagement in professional learning opportunities and funded these through a range of additional grants, special "one-off" programs and various "opportunities" that presented from time to time. Teachers valued these activities and they were linked to developing meaningful day to day pedagogy.

In summary, responsive pedagogy and strong teacher-student relationships improve academic and social adjustment, both in the short and longer term. The key message from educational effectiveness research is that quality teaching and school leadership are important aspects of building a successful school and raising student academic achievement. As highlighted in the literature review, studies emphasised that it is not so much *what* students bring to school that matters, but their learning experiences at school and the extent to which schools actively reaches out to families.

7.3. School leadership and governance

Underpinning most effective schools are strong leaders and inspirational and democratic leadership. School leadership makes a difference to student outcomes. Leadership is critical to building and supporting trusting and collaborative relationships within the school and with families and communities. Principals who promote shared vision, goals and expectations, and take initiatives and seize opportunities are simultaneously supporting staff in their teaching endeavours. Effective leadership in schools both supports and is supported by teacher competence. In turn, this competence supports positive student outcomes (Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004; Silins & Mulfor, 2002). Students' positive perceptions of pedagogical environments are directly related to their engagement with learning, their self concepts and affiliation with school.

School principals' work and roles have intensified over the past couple of decades. This intensification is an unintended consequence of more complex schooling and management structures and high-stakes school accountability. Successful school leaders establish an accountable, professional culture in their schools and share the roles of leadership by giving teacher agency to generate ideas, innovations and practices. The notion of "distributed leadership", in which principals share leadership roles with staff, promote democratic governance, and employ a team approach to decision making was valued by staff.

Conversations in schools highlighted that principals needed support from colleagues and the wider community to sustain effective learning cultures. Case study schools highlighted the value of "democratic", "participatory" team-based planning and decision-making and practice, genuine caring for staff, students and families, and ethical and reflective practice in building teacher commitment and strengths, and involving families and community. Definitions of "shared", "democratic" or "participatory leadership" embodied ideas of active teacher engagement and decision-making in purposeful "learning communities" that enabled each school's capacity to engage with families.

7.3.1 Mobilising professional commitment

As Fullan (2001) says, effective leadership is about mobilising people's "commitment" to action designed to improve things. It is about individual commitment, but above all it is about "collective mobilisation." In particular, according to Fullan (2001) leadership has five main components:

A clear moral purpose

Relationship building

Skills to understand and measure change

Knowledge creation and sharing, and

Ensuring coherence of structures and management processes

Central to effective school leadership and governance is building teachers' capacity to implement high quality curricula geared to the needs of individual students. These curricula aim to promote

student engagement in learning and enable professional development and reflection (Louis et al., 1996). In turn, teachers' engagement with their own learning impacts on the quality of teaching.

As mentioned earlier, conversations in schools highlighted the unique role of principals in promoting relations with families and community and supporting teachers in their work. Specifically, while clearly "in charge", effective principals shared or distributed leadership roles and encouraged and supported teachers who sought innovative ways to engage families and personalise and enrich curriculum. Essentially, principals provided overt and enthusiastic support for teachers' work. They encouraged them to share in the school's successes and participate in the celebratory functions as well as the day to day events.

Several teachers commented on feeling "supported" and "valued" and that they were not "left alone". Teachers appreciated that they were given time to work with families, for example, "release from face-to-face teaching" to talk with families. However, communicating and engaging with families was time consuming and conversations were often held outside typical teacher work hours to coincide with students' and families' needs.

Visits to schools and conversations with school staff revealed a very strong sense of professionalism that pervaded the whole school. Teachers looked "professional" and schools were physically attractive with sculptures and garden art, flower arrangements in the entry foyers and photo displays, functional and attractive play spaces, well maintained gardens and a general "attention to detail". Two principals indicated that they personally undertook painting and repair tasks to ensure their schools were attractive for children, families and staff.

In fact, the characteristic that most stood out perhaps in visits to schools was the overwhelming dedication, commitment and vision of principals. Principals were without exception very warmly regarded, even "loved" by parents, colleagues and children. They were highly visible in and around the school with "open door" policies *and* practice to children, parents and staff. As one parent said of a principal: "He loves his school to death."

While there may be a temptation to develop detailed guidelines for principals and schools to ensure that families become better engaged with schools, detailed or prescriptive guides are likely to be viewed by school leaders and teachers as exacerbating their already intensive and challenging work loads. Further, strategies must be targeted to the needs of individual schools and communities. Like classroom teachers, principals and other executive staff are struggling to meet increasing policy and practice driven professional demands as well as balance family and home responsibilities. As several recent studies of school leaders and likely leaders have shown, there is no great rush to become a school principal (Lacey, 2003). While principals are generally satisfied with their work (Cranston, 2002; Cranston et al., 2004) and many see their job as a "way of life" (Victorian Department of Education, 2004) the demands of the role are substantial and often off-putting.

7.4. Harnessing community resources

There is a complex range of overlapping student, teacher and school variables that combine with family and community characteristics to explain school success. First, is understanding and valuing families' cultures and building trust, second, is developing a rich, responsive classroom pedagogy that focuses on the personal needs of learners, and third is harnessing the strengths of community agencies and key individuals to complement and support schools' out-reach effort. Typically, creating a school and classroom culture that embodies families' values and needs and supports students' growth and development requires a collaborative effort across the school and various agencies and key organisations and individuals at a local level.

Traditionally, non state schools have drawn extensively from formal as well as informal community agencies, groups, and individuals, and especially faith-based groups, to enrich school culture, community and programs. Independent schools with cultural and religious affiliations such as such Islamic, Buddhist, and Jewish schools, as well as various Christian and other non sectarian schools (such as Montessori or Rudolf Steiner schools) capitalise on their community resources, expertise and links and shared philosophical orientations. Growing evidence suggests that even when these schools are located in low income or disadvantaged communities, they have the presumption of shared cultural values and expectations and strong and well articulated visions and requirements for children's behaviours and learning outcomes. Most importantly,

shared experiences outside the school, and considerable crossover between school, families and often communities, including for example working or worshiping together, help establish ties with the school.

Developing the most effective relationships with families and building special programs and interventions for vulnerable students requires greater investment and effort than many schools can normally muster alone. Reaching out to families and providing special programs for children is resource intensive. Working in partnership with community based organisations helps reach families and bring their assets into schools. Involving families might also involve first developing their 'capacity', that is their skills, knowledge and motivation to support their children's learning. While schools are not usually resourced for capacity building exercises with families and communities, working with community agencies and groups enables better use of existing resources and access to additional support. Working with established community groups, leaders and individuals enables schools to establish more "holistic approaches" to children's health, development and learning needs (Briggs & Mueller, 1997). Linking with existing community services such as local medical practitioners, pharmacies, maternal and child heath nurses (or equivalent) as well as with agencies or individuals that have strong links to families helps schools build relationships with families.

Of the case study schools visited as part of this project, most had strong relations and partnerships with their local communities, including with community volunteers, mental health workers, faith-based organisations, medical practitioners, and various professionals from agencies such as the Salvation Army and Anglicare. Involvement happened at a variety of levels from regular visits by educational support staff and volunteer parents (and others) to an almost "full service" school. But these links and partnerships did not develop overnight. They were built up over a period of time by sustained effort and out reach work, typically over a period of about 5 to 7 years.

7.4.1 Scaffolding families' engagement
Each of the schools had at its core the notion of scaffolding families' active engagement with their children's development and learning from the preschool years into the first and subsequent years of school. In each school too, there was an overt willingness to initiate activities and adopt

strategies which were obviously resource intensive. Generally, scaling up strategies to better engage families and students has required focused efforts and principal targeted initiatives within the wider community. Inevitably, progression towards more collaborative endeavours with families and outside agencies has been slow, somewhat unpredictable and highly dependent on a range of factors including the nature of the school community, individual family characteristics, and resources. The typical ebb and flow of policy and resources, and especially staff expertise and confidence and staff turnover, impact on continuity of initiatives and programs.

Conversations in case study schools indicated that collaborating with individuals, agencies and groups already established and trusted within local communities, sharing existing community resources and genuinely opening schools to the community, provided a range of resources and tools that were simply not available within the "system". These out-reach efforts were generally successful in building a sense of cultural common ground that was generally "missing" because families were not connected with each other in any way, let alone with the school.

In most of the schools visited, principals and often teachers had initiated strong ties with community leaders, such as "elders" in Indigenous or Islander communities, key local business people such as publicans or real estate agents, police officers, and community based agencies such as the Salvation Army, Anglicare and local churches. Two schools employed a community liaison officer to help build and manage such relationships. As mentioned earlier, schools with a mix of families and substantial pockets of family hardships, communications and strategies that are personally targeted are especially important. Personal conversations when children are brought to school, conversations during community activities, mailed letters, phone calls, and text messages are likely to be much more effective communication channels than formal newsletters that are often lost in the depths of school bags before they reach parents. As shown repeatedly, word-of-mouth via friends, family and community networks are often the most effective channels of communication with families.

7.4.2 Starting right
Fundamental to engaging with families and boosting learning opportunities for children is reaching them early. Linking with parents, community agencies and preschools and child care

centres, holds the key to smooth transitions to school and to enhanced development pathways for children, including improved language and literacy. Where language and literacy skills are nurtured in the home *and* in preschool programs, children are set for positive literacy experiences at school. What is clear is that families and early childhood programs should work in concert. Working collaboratively with families, and building capacity where needed strengthens families' confidence and competence to support their children's development and learning. However, for school-family and community partnerships to benefit students, whatever the level, there must be:

A commitment for relevant parties to work together.

Shared aims and goals based on common understandings children's cultural contexts and their social and educational needs, and

A degree of coherence, reciprocity and mutuality, that begins with the process of listening to each other and developing trust, and which incorporates responsive dialogue, flexibility and "give and take" on both sides (Bidhulph *et al*, 2003; Elliott, 2000; Epstein, 2001).

The following strategies, or mix of strategies were reported to be effective in linking with and harnessing community connections.

7.4.3 Harnessing community resources

Hosting a playgroup or mothers (and/or fathers) group on the school site to engage families with preschool aged children and then involving and then integrating these families in the life of the school. Linking with the Baby Health Centre Nurse (or equivalent in each state)

Hosting an after school or homework centre on the school site with volunteer help- for example students from a local university

Sharing and/or hosting community services on site such as medical services, social welfare services, playgroups, preschools and child care centres. The "one-stop-shop" or "wraparound services" approach

Regular, personal and genuine targeting of parents (and others such as community elders) to share their skills with children or the school and to volunteer as reading tutors and other classroom helpers. Not just a call for volunteers in the weekly newsletter

Initiating community service activities, events and programs such as musical performances in shopping centres, helping in Nursing Homes or child care centres, caring for a local park, and helping to protect a community resource under threat.

Providing parenting classes or events such as "practical parenting", helping with homework and computer classes and personalising invitations to these events. Communicating outcomes from these groups with parents who are unable to attend.

Facilitating collaborative efforts to help the school and simultaneously drawing on families skills in a social format- such as a quilt making group or a learn to knit class

Linking with parents and other well connected community members (such as a local community leader, football coach, dancer or dance teacher or local musician) to communicate with families and draw families into the school

Linking with local services including the police, fire brigade, Local Government, local businesses and community organisations such as Rotary, Water Watch and Environmental groups and welfare and faith-based agencies such as the Salvation Army, the Smith Family, Anglicare and Uniting Care.

As discussed earlier, efforts to engage parents and forge partnerships to improve educational opportunities for children are generally unsuccessful if the school is isolated from its community. But community is more than a shared post code. Families who use state schools often have few existing ties with a school, and share little in common with other neighbourhood families. Often they live outside the local, regular school catchment area. A school in a vulnerable community in particular, must tap every available community resource to link with families and support children's learning. While strong, personalised pedagogies are critical as discussed in Section 7.2, linking with established community organisations provides the additional support and resources to enrich curricula, plus the links, networks or inroads into the community that are often missing.

8. Challenges

Visits to case study schools conveyed an overwhelming sense of optimism, good will and enthusiasm combined with a strong sense of academic purpose, discipline and pastoral care. However, several challenges were raised by participants concerned with building strong home-

school connectedness. First, was the difficulty in mobilising teacher support for activities often considered outside typical day-to-day teaching responsibilities and school hours. Second, the complexity and high demands of the principal's role in leading, supporting and managing change at the school and community level. Third, was the need for adequate resourcing to support initiatives. Finally, there was considerable concern about child safety issues, insurance matters, and the impact of mandatory police checks and related security measures on parents and other community members who might visit the school. Some people felt that any initiative that involved parents and "outsiders" coming into schools or children "going into their communities" was under threat because of child protection, safety and insurance issues.

Difficulties in resourcing active engagement with families, especially in schools that serve low income, vulnerable and/or culturally and linguistically diverse and minority communities, was an on-going concern for schools. In the case of the case study schools though, teachers frequently worked outside typical school hours to provide sports training and cultural and musical events or to contact parents. Typically though, because schools in economically disadvantaged areas have poorer resources, more outdated teaching materials, amongst the most inexperienced teachers, and high staff turnover (NSW Teachers Federation, 2005; Ramsey, 2000) it can be difficult to initiate the transformational changes to culture necessary to create climate and pedagogies for valuing and engaging students, let alone the outreach work needed to build collaborative strategies, parent involvement and partnerships or community social capital. Schools consulted as part of this work were generally successful and creative in harnessing community resources to assist in their out reach and engagement efforts, but principals had an "on-going battle" to locate resources and were on a "never ending submission writing treadmill". In each school there was a core groups of leaders and staff who worked well above and beyond the "call of duty" sourcing funding and other support. Addressing resources disparities might well be a key step to enabling all schools to better engage with families. However, all the resources in the world will not compensate for teachers who lack professional and personal commitment to children and learning.

9. Concluding comments and reflection

This paper points to a range of ideas and strategies about *what matters* and *what works* in improving student and family engagement and connectedness with schooling. Generally, the body of evidence, theory and expert opinion on establishing, boosting and sustaining school-community involvement, partnerships and collaborations, points to benefits for students. Connections with learning lead to better academic and social outcomes and school retention inevitably increases. Strong positive effects are most evident for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and culturally and linguistically diverse families. At the same time, the issues raised here point to a number of challenges for policy makers and schools.

The literature and conversations with school personnel and community members highlight the evolving nature of community and connectedness in local school contexts. School-community connectedness doesn't happen quickly. Communities and schools undergo many transformations that require attendant adjustments to build and sustain effective communications and engagement. Strong school-family-community relations result from an on-going commitment and effort over many years and are characterised by a combination of inspirational and distributed leadership, a sense of trust and ownership by families, children and teachers, strong governance and egalitarian decision making, on-going professional development, patience in communicating and working with stakeholders, and an ability to bridge different cultures-institutional, community and personal.

Both the literature review and conversations within schools that had achieved a sense of connectedness with their communities indicated that building family trust was at the core of later engagement with children's learning. Trusting relationships were especially important in communities characterised by a complex matrix of problems within families. Most importantly, all sources stressed that schools must first look to their own environments and practices for solutions, and work toward a "cohesive, continuous, integrated strategy" to engage families (Warren, 2005) rather than seeking a quick fix or simply "blaming" parents or expecting school authorities to engage families. It was clear that trust and engagement were local concerns. Building trust and becoming securely connected with communities and families involves multi-

pronged strategies including *reaching out* and *working from within*. In addition, because teachers have challenging enough jobs teaching, and schools, especially in economically vulnerable communities have limited resources, community organisations such as service and sporting clubs, churches, and welfare agencies and services such as the police and fire brigades become important conduits in establishing and supporting connections with families.

9.1 What matters most?

So what matters most? What works? Clearly, *reaching out* to families is required to build the social capacity necessary to facilitate networks in communities, boost parenting skills and support students' learning, and foster engagement with school practices. Concomitantly, transforming classrooms to better connect with children and their families is critical for schools. But first, as stressed in the literature review (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Eggers-Pierola, 2004) and later from school conversations, both require efforts to identify and value the culture and practices embedded in families' homes and communities. Initially, collaborating with community groups already established and trusted within local communities, sharing existing community resources and genuinely opening schools to the community, can help build the type of community trust and capacity that that seems missing in many efforts to engage families and reshape school culture (Stone, Henig, Jones & Pierannunzi, 2001; Purdie & Strong, 2005; Warren, 2005).

Connectedness is a two way processs. It requires teachers and educational leaders who recognise the challenges faced by all families, but especially those in economically disadvantaged circumstances, and who are prepared to work actively to counter the inequalities that underpin many children's school problems. Merely, perpetuating the current *status quo* in schools is unjust and inequitable.

Thinking about school-community connectedness and its likely implications needs to be based, as far as possible, on findings from sound research and exemplary practice. As outlined in the previous sections, four major intersecting or overlapping factors emerge as most influencing and supporting productive and quality student learning:

Understanding and valuing children, families and their communities;

Making curriculum and pedagogies meaningful, challenging and cognitively explicit,

Compassionate and inspirational leadership and school governance, and

Forging community networks and support structures, strengthening family capacity and boosting parenting skills, and building confidence to support children's schooling

In deciding what matters most, teachers are at the top of the list. They are central to any discussion about quality teaching and learning. The fact that pedagogy makes such difference to students' school experiences and learning outcomes should provide impetus and encouragement to boost quality teaching and teaching standards in Australian schools. As Linda Darling-Hammond concludes – "good teaching is critical and the effect of poor quality teaching on student outcomes is debilitating and cumulative" (2000, p. 3). Highlighted time and time again, both in the literature and in school-based conversations was the key role and value of classroom teachers. Helping teachers strengthen their pedagogy and better connect with families and children as part of this pedagogy is critical.

It was clear from both the literature and conversations in case study schools, that parent engagement in children's learning, rarely happens without strategic and overt encouragement, support and outreach from schools (Haghighat, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Warren, 2005). Parents in vulnerable communities tend not to voluntarily become involved in supporting children's learning or respond through traditional formal, one-way communication such as Newsletters or parent meetings. Yet, as was highlighted in the literature, schools typically use strategies that involve informing and soliciting support, rather than listening to families' and addressing their needs (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, & Foley, 2001). Rarely do such strategies result in effective parental engagement or connectedness (Epstein, 2001, p. 4). Rather, schools must first identify with families and communities and then actively reach out to them.

Evidence from both literature and schools points to the complexity of achieving school-community engagement and connectedness. Actively engaging families from vulnerable communities can be hampered by the matrix of disadvantage resulting from cumulative and interwoven effects of poverty, isolation, indifference and alienation. While it is not possible for

schools to ameliorate poverty-related disadvantages that impact negatively on children's educational aspirations and learning outcomes, reaching out to families from *within* the school and classroom *and* working collectively with community agencies to strengthen networks, develop reciprocal awareness of needs and actively communicate with families does improve educational performance. For schools to truly improve relations with families and students they must listen to them, take a genuine interest in their views and experiences and win their trust and support. First though, building trust and communicating with families require concomitant principal leadership and teacher action. From this can emerge collaborative programs that engage both families and students in meaningful tasks in meaningful contexts. Evidence suggests, however, that schools can rarely do this if they are working alone. They must both reach out to families and work collaboratively with relevant community agencies to build and sustain connectedness. Alliances with community groups and leaders offer possibly the best chance to develop holistic approaches that address communication, parenting, health and nutrition issues that underscore students' effective engagement with education.

According to Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), school and home are part of the same socio-cultural system and effective relationships between family contexts and schools are critical to a well functioning society. These relationships are first built on shared understandings about goals, experiences and outcomes. However, in the case of public schooling, there is often a mismatch between the cultures, values and expectations of schools and those of predominant cultural groups or individual families using the school. Too often, attempts to explain mismatches, discontinuity and disconnections between schools and families, resort to "deficit models" that accuse families of failing to care about their children, rather than looking closely and respectfully at the structures, relationships and strengths among families and communities and building on these to transform teaching and learning.

Most families want the best for their children and want to feel empowered as parents. As shown in the growing literature around community building and connectedness in the communications and psychology arenas, families want to feel anchored and connected in their communities. This fundamental need for belonging and social relationships and a "pursuit of connectedness" has fuelled the development and marketing of the communications technology industry. Relatedly, the dramatic increase in independent schools in recent years is largely attributed to families' and

communities' beliefs about the importance of explicit and shared values and beliefs not only about the academic aspects of education and schooling, but more broadly, in terms of religion, culture, values and social goals, expectations and competence. At a time when there is considerable choice about schooling parents are becoming discerning educational consumers. A key factor in selecting schooling is alignment of home and school values, a well rounded rich curriculum, strong programs of individual student care, and sensitivity and responsiveness to children's social and cognitive needs.

Although there is robust empirical and school-based evidence on the positive effects of parent-school-community collaboration, there is no blueprint for what works for which schools, communities and families. There is no one-size-fits-all model for engaging families. In disadvantaged communities in particular, or in schools with pockets of disadvantage, effective strategies for building positive and meaningful relations and partnerships with families can be difficult to identify and to implement given the complexity of family circumstances together with the many demands in schools, varying teacher competence and workloads, and industrial considerations. Involving parents can be time and resource intensive especially in communities with fragile social capital and internal capacity. It is clear however, that school leaders and teachers have the key roles in facilitating strong home-school connections.

Importantly, building respectful, trusting relations with families is at the core of connectedness. This must occur at both the school and classroom level and be an integral part of a day-to-day pedagogy well as part of broader system and school initiatives (Houseman & Martinez, 2002; Redding, 2002). However, as was clear from evidence cited in the literature review and from discussions within schools, given the time and effort involved in forging meaningful relationships with families, most schools cannot "go it alone". Teachers and schools must work with and be supported by established organisations and draw on volunteers and already "connected" families in their communities to be most effective.

Research evidence together with findings from conversations with staff and others in case study schools show that building school-community connectedness takes time and requires patience, continuity and strategic and overt encouragement, support and outreach, primarily on the part of

schools. Few parents in vulnerable communities become involved in their children's education without explicit support and encouragement from schools. Schools seeking to engage families must first build their trust. Overwhelmingly, both the literature and school responses indicated that schools must initiate and sustain communication with families if they are to genuinely engage with them. No partnership can be successful unless all the partners know each other, and have agreed about how the partnership should develop, defining responsibilities of all parties. Few of us would give our money, let alone our children to others and then expect to hear from them only when there is a problem. Parents of preschool-aged children expect and receive daily reports about their children. Yet once children start school, many parents have no personal contact with their children's teachers, or at the best only annual contact at a parent-teacher meeting, let alone regular communications about children's progress. Few schools endeavour to meet parents and get to know them before their children start school. Too few schools get to know each parent and actively communicate with them about their children's development and learning.

Deep disconnects between schools, students' families and communities can be overcome by patience, persistence and a change in school's core policies and practices to more effectively adapt to the cultural and learning needs of families and children. Additionally, engaging students requires pedagogy and curriculum that have deep meaning for students and a school environment that is consistent in terms of its purposes and expectations. It was clear from the literature and conversations within schools, that home-school connectedness does not develop in a vacuum. It is built on trust and communication and entwined with curriculum and pedagogy which is in turn shaped by inspirational and wise leadership and quality teaching.

10. The next step. Scenarios for the future.

This discussion paper points to a number of issues that can inform thinking and action to better connect schools and communities. Thinking about school-community connectedness and its likely implication needs to be evidence based but within the parameters of local schools and communities. Fundamental in this regard, is evidence on the intersecting or overlapping factors that influence and support productive and quality student learning. Better understanding the theoretical and practical issues in connecting schools, families and communities is an important first step in committing to change and planning for action. Deciding "what matters most" is central to engaging students and families, sustaining improved learning and lasting change in schools, and building home-school connectedness.

A leadership role for DET in supporting schools to better engage with their communities might include a focus on the following:

Working with schools and communities to develop long term, overarching goals, priorities and action plans that articulate desired outcomes to support schools and teachers' capacity to engage with families and support parenting

Initiating and coordinating discussions with schools across a range of communities into specific engagement approaches and strategies that could enhance communication with families and build positive relations and later connectedness

Teaming well connected schools with less well connected schools to share ideas and strategies

Building capacity in schools and amongst teachers to optimise learning outcomes for students, enhance communication with parents and work collaboratively with community agencies, services and key individuals

Joint development and articulation of a set of desired indicators that reflect substantial changes in student engagement with learning and academic and social outcomes. Indicators need to include both short term measures of progress to wards goals and longer term indicators that assess progress over time

Conversations with teacher educators about ways of better preparing graduates for their key roles with families in schools. This requires a change of mindset and orientation on the part of teacher education programs

Providing mentoring support and professional learning to support and sustain principals' roles in building connectedness and facilitate their support for teachers and families

Supporting processes for building sustained school-wide capacity through collective and coordinated effort to share and strengthen leadership

Engaging with key personnel from relevant community agencies to develop a shared vision for collaboration and cooperation at a community and school level

None of these strategies stand alone; they build on each other and many overlap.

10.1 Scenario building. Developing a professional learning plan

One approach to improving whole school based visions and strategies is to enhance connectedness through scenario-building. Professional learning scenarios would provide a model and process for using good practice examples identified in the literature and case study schools as a basis for building action plans in each school. The aim of the action plans would be to engage students, parents and the school community to develop, strengthen and sustain connectivity and collaborative practices across the school community.

The scenario-building model could take the form of a series of mentored workshops in which school teams build site and community specific scenarios and action plans to embed and embrace strategies across curricula and pedagogy and develop a strong co-curricula or other site specific programs/strategies to actively engage families and communities.

Ideally, there would be two scenario-building workshops with the goal of developing school, agency, student and family informed strategies to enhance connectedness. Workshops and participant thinking and decision making would be structured using Zing collaborative team thinking processes. Articles such as those included in Appendix B and C could help focus and stimulate discussion.

Outcomes from these workshops would.lead to professional learning plan that could become a model for system-wide implementation.

10.2 Scenario building workshops

Scenario building is a way to sharpen understanding of how school-community connectedness may develop and the potential role of policy and practice in helping to shape the future. Scenario development can be an effective means of bringing together the "big picture" of strategic aims for schooling, the long-term processes of change, and multiple factors that impact on outcomes. Scenarios can help to clarify and stimulate thinking about the future, and the steps that need to be put in place now to ensure that practitioners and policy makers are working together towards achieving the "preferred" future rather than being the passive recipients of whatever may unfold (OECD, 2001).

In this case, scenario building will use predictions or forecasts about likely developments, research and consultative findings and debates about "ideal" models of connectedness to develop a range of possible strategies for strengthening school, family and community connectedness.

Developing a range of scenarios signals the multiple pathways to connectedness. Using collaborative ICT scaffolded processes that helps model collaboration as well as brainstorm and stimulate thinking and planning, the scenarios will focus attention on what needs to be done to help bring about preferred innovative and successful community-school communication, connectedness, and collaboration, overcome barriers to communication with families, and harness the resources of community leaders, networks and agencies.

10.3 Scenario Building Parameters

The process of building Professional Learning Plans as part of Scenario Building Workshops should be based on the following assumptions:

- The importance of building on best practice evidence and reflecting on current practice
- Participants work best on problems they have identified as relevant to their settings
- Participants are more effective when they are encouraged to examine and assess their own assumptions and find creative ways of working differently
- Participants help each other by working collaboratively
- Personal and professional development is enhanced by working with colleagues with like interests

- Strategy development and actions plans are contextual and depend on disciplined inquiry which will lead to improved practice
- The process culminates in a course of action and preferred outcomes and a plan for evaluating outcomes over a short and longer term period.

Galvanising ideas to action will be supported by the use of a team approach to consensus building facilitated by Zing Technology's collaborative decision making and team building processes.

Appendices

Appendix A

Case study overview and approach

This section outlines the rationale and methodology for the case studies in schools that have established successful home-school connectedness or have initiated strong outreach programs to build relationships with their communities. It commences by outlining the rationale for the case study methodology and then details the methodological considerations- the interpretative framework, the research design, data gathering procedures, and data analysis.

Planning and design considerations

The main aim of the case studies was to help determine what works, for whom and under what circumstances in the light of a school's vision and strategy and contemporary research on school-community connectedness.

The data gathering process had three dimensions:

Process Focus on the process of implementing school-community relations, collaborations and partnerships within schools

Impact Determining the short-term effects of initiatives in each school. It focuses on the extent to which initiatives (a) meet objectives, and (b) engage the school, students and community.

Outcomes Focusing on the impact of initiatives as projected by contemporary perspectives on effective School partnership including (a) engaging the school, students and community, (b) strengthening outcomes for students, and (c) improving the ethos of the school.

Eight schools that have established or are in the process of establishing strong school-community connections and are widely regarded as being well connected with their communities were visited. Schools were identified as sites of best practice by their nomination in professional publications and by key educational personnel. All schools are located in economically disadvantaged and/or culturally and linguistically diverse communities or in communities with significant pockets of disadvantage.

The schools are:

Location	Approximate Enrolment	Community/family characteristics
Outer suburban Melbourne primary school	360	Predominantly new arrivals and refugees. High levels of unemployment and welfare dependence
Regional Melbourne primary school	80	Predominantly rural community on the edge of a large regional town.
Outer suburban Sydney primary school	330	Predominantly new arrivals and refugees and well established Islamic and other Asian families.
Inner suburban Sydney primary school	100	Mixed community with pockets of disadvantage including Indigenous students, low income families, and low income student families
Inner suburban Sydney primary school	350	Mixed community with pockets of disadvantage including Indigenous and Islander students, low income families, and low income student families
Outer suburban Darwin school	470	Mixed community. Large numbers of Indigenous students and students from highly mobile (or transient families) including Defence Force families
ACT school 1		Each ACT school had been a recipient of School Equity Fund monies
ACT school 2		
ACT school 3		

The research was approached from an interpretative perspective that proposes development of relative and deductive understandings of situations leading to rich narratives detailing the phenomena being investigated. An interpretative framework suggests that that knowledge is much more than gathering empirical data (Denzin 2002; Neuman 1997). Instead it proposes a diverse range of data gathering options, which together enable a more detailed exploration of events and which are more likely to yield a **depth** of understanding rarely available in quantitative methodologies.

The study used site and participant observations, interviews and document reviews to understand the processes each school employs to engage and connect with its communities. Importantly, the meanings and perceptions that school staff assigned to their particular contexts and the inter-subjective dynamics that arise as a result of interactions were explored. This first hand experience of teachers', schools' and parents' perspectives of their interactions with each other should lead to an enhanced understanding of intent, actions, and processes. Of particular interest were perceptions about the extent to which initiatives have been successful, how these are assessed and whether they are backed up by empirical data from school records and test results, such as the year 3 and 5 basic skills tests or similar.

Interpreting data from school visits was dependent on understanding the contextual bases and meanings within schools and their communities as assigned by participants and then building meanings about school-community relations and connectedness in the light of available information. Case study data for three schools (shown in Appendix D) provide insight into "what works" in real contexts and what may be generalisable to other contexts.

School case studies

Case studies from 8 schools provided the main source of data for investigating connectedness. Case studies are reliable and representative research tools that enable development of sound descriptions of processes, actions and meanings within specific contexts. Case studies were ideal for this project because they provided a means of investigating real life contexts with multiple dimensions and influences. The case studies enabled data to be drawn from teachers', families' and students' perceptions of events and actions and assembled for interpretation.

In accordance with well established research design principles, this project ensured that

- the schools selected had wide relevance and are justifiably representative of others
- there was an openness to alternate interpretations where suggested
- there was provision of a holistic view rather than segmented episodic views, and that
- data are deeply layered through multiple sources- in this case, through conversations with school principals, teachers, and parents and other school personnel such as school-community liaison officers, plus through reports of events, examination of documents and through observations at school sites.

Sufficient data were collected to:

- examine and determine significant features of each school and community
- build realistic interpretations of reports and observations
- test the validity of these interpretations
- construct a worthwhile story, and
- relate the story to literature review evidence (Bassey, 1999).

Conversations in schools

"Conversations" with key personal and participants in schools were the main source of information on school-community relations and strategies that build successful connectivity. Conversations with key participants provided immediate and accessible sources of information and clarification of ideas and perspectives. Conversations were open-ended and targeted to pinpoint the underpinnings of each school's strategies to connect with its community as well as the key features of the engagement processes and key enablers, indicators of success and barriers to engagement and connectedness. Because of the importance of teacher effectiveness and classroom climate in connecting schools and communities identified in the literature, questions also probed the extent to which schools were able to support their classroom teachers' efforts to listen to families' and students' needs and to build their trust, to actively engage students and families, and to support professional learning for teachers.

In addition background information was gathered from school documents such as reports to government.

Because school contexts and initiatives are so diverse indicators of success varied considerably from school to school. The indicators listed in Table 1 were drawn from the literature review.

Indicators off effectiveness

Given that the school initiatives are at various stages in their cycles and that the schools are so different it is difficult to pin point substantial and sustained change in student outcomes and school ethos or to compare schools and strategies. Positive changes are likely to accrue over long periods. It may take many years, even decades to build a strong, sense of school-community connectedness.

Main indicators of successful school-community connectedness in schools with a tradition of family ambivalence or alienation include: improvements in basic skills test results in years 3 and 5 and other years as specific in each state, reduced incidence of bullying, vandalism, homework completion, increased family support for and participation in school events, increased student attendance and school. A list of typical indicators is shown below. In this project, a mix of the

following family /community involvement indicators were used as a basis for exploring dimensions of community-school connectedness and partnerships.

Table 1

Community involvement and partnerships indicators

Baseline	Evidence/ and or extent of changes, outcomes and/or level of engagement
Students' attendance at school	
Parents' attendance at functions such as P & C (or equivalent) meetings; parents' at assemblies; canteen; classroom volunteering.	
Parents have clear information on how to contact school and individual teachers by email and phone and written form.	
Extent to which school provides opportunities and encouragement for parents to see work displays, observe students, participate in policy making at various times to accommodate all parents.	
Parents' subscription to on-line newsletters	
School assessment of levels and extent of parent involvement	
School staff perception of school-home relations	
Parents' perceptions of school communication strategies.	
Family and/ or parent social events. Fun nights, community breakfasts, weekend events	
New (and existing) parents welcomed to the school with a welcome function each year. Parent dinner or social function for parents (and children) in each class/year group. Parent coordinator for each class/year group	
Extent to which classroom teacher and other relevant personnel are available to all parents	
Frequency of parent teacher conferences	
Frequency and content of newsletter/s	
Provision of parent classes/workshops about child or school-related issues.	
Processes for informing parents of sick or truant/absent student	
Process for parent notification when children are having academic difficulties	
School has a policy on volunteers and a process for recruiting and	

supporting volunteers	
Volunteers are recognised and rewarded for their efforts	
Processes for involving and informing non resident parents	
School schedules parent activities and school events at various times to suit parents' family and work commitments	
School use of media resources	

School provides parent sessions on:
    Parenting
    Family literacy
    Drug, alcohol and gambling awareness
    Wellness, health and nutrition
    Bullying
    Child/adolescent development
    Parent/child communication
    Transition to High School/University/Work
    Transition to school
    Programs/advice for families
    Behaviour and social competence
    Vocational counselling
 	
Workshops are co-presented	

Workshops for teachers on family and community needs	
Frequency and processes for collecting information on families' needs and expectations of the school.	
Teacher engagement in professional learning	
Family and students support for school rules and procedures (such as uniforms)	

Relationships, partnerships, collaboration,

School has partnerships with outside agencies, businesses, and organisations to enhance the social and cultural capital of students and families	
School provides support and/or referrals for families with difficulties	
Students are provided with community service opportunities	
The school has a written policy on family involvement and family-community partnerships	
Family and community members share knowledge and skills within school community	
The School administration facilitates teachers' need to meet parents at a time that suits family needs and work commitments	
Transport is provided to school events	

The school setting is warm and welcoming for parents and visitors. Staff are warm and welcoming to family members	
Parents have a comfortable place to meet as necessary.	
Family and community involvement is genuinely valued and welcomed.	

Student outcomes

Attendance and absenteeism Lateness Uniform compliance	
Homework completion	
Progress in Literacy and Numeracy or other measures. Year 3 and 5 Literacy	
Participation in school events	
Incidence of bullying	
Student satisfaction with teaching and school climate	
Retention rates	

Data analyses

Data from the interviews, field notes and records, documents from schools, and details of indicator outcomes were assembled to form case studies on each school, three of which are reported in Appendix D. All were drawn upon in the Discussion Paper. Data were analysed to provide descriptive, explanatory and exploratory information on ways in which schools reach out to families, what works in various contexts and what principles might be generalisable to ACT Appendix

Appendix B

OECD reasons to involve parents in education

The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1997, p. 26) highlights several interrelated reasons for initiatives to involve parents in education within OECD countries.

• **Democracy.** In many countries in the OECD study, parental involvement in education is seen as a right or as a democratic value, which may be part of legislation, such as in France, Germany and Denmark.

• **Accountability.** This is a market-oriented concept whereby school-family partnerships are seen as business partnerships in which both parties benefit and operate more effectively.

• **Consumer choice.** As consumers, parents should have the right to choose schools and also to influence the way in which they operate.

• **Lever for raising standards.** Several studies in Australia, the U.K and the U.S. show that schools with good levels of student academic achievement and positive student attitudes toward learning and schooling, have sound home-school relations (Brighouse & Tomlinson, 1991; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000, p. 1).

• **Tackling disadvantage and improving equity.** This relates to improving individual student performance by enabling parents to support children more effectively at home. This is especially important when there are cultural differences between the family and school.

• **Addressing social problems.** Policy-makers in various countries are relying on schools for solutions and assistance with teenage social problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

• **Resources.** Parents raise funds in schools and can act as cost effective resources as helpers on school visits or excursions, coaches or assistants in sporting activities, or teachers' aides in the classroom.

Appendix C

Articles for reflection and discussion 1

Time to take the community into the classroom
Source: The Age , July 30, 2006
Posted: 22-08-2006

Comment by Don Edgar.

It's time for a more lateral approach to the future of schooling. The first need is to shift the boundaries between school and family, school and community. A modern knowledge economy means teachers are not the only educators (as if they ever were); they are navigators guiding children through the maze of information available on the world wide web and in the wider community, helping each find his or her strengths in an ever-changing landscape of work and family relationships.

Any notion of respect for teachers must (as the kids indicate already) rest on how effective teachers are in guiding them, not on their assumed role of exclusive fount of wisdom.

That means, too, that schools have to be part of the community, welcoming parents, visitors, business leaders, grandparents and welfare workers as vital supporters of the learning process. Instead of bemoaning the welfare and emotional demands being placed on schools by dysfunctional families, principals have to face the realities and insist that enough school counsellors, guidance officers and remedial support teachers are employed so teachers can get on with what they are best at - guiding pupils in the specialist areas of learning.

Schools need to be rebuilt not as schools, but as family learning centres, true community centres where all the supports children need are available in the one place, easy for all parents to access.

The modern primary school would have room for child care - long-day care, short-term care, as well as out-of-school hours care. It would offer preschool classes and provide for parenting groups to explain to parents how to stimulate their children's curiosity and learning skills at home. They would have annexes for family support services, financial counselling, guidance and remedial teaching, even a coffee shop and lounge.

Middle schools would have a different configuration - more open space, more room for physical and practical activities, community service with more emphasis on group learning and fostering emotional intelligence in young teenagers wanting to explore life more freely.

And senior secondary colleges would be closely aligned with local business, students compiling a skills portfolio through work experience, extended community service, lots of room for working from home or from the local library rather than being confined within school boundaries.

They would combine with adult and further education, so they would foster what the Boyer Report long ago called meaningful inter-generational relationships that combat the horizontal culture in which peer groups are isolated to the detriment of each other. In an ageing society, many older people could become mentors, tutors, teacher support workers guiding young adults to make better life choices.

The new school would not just be one that specialises in music, maths or art; it would offer the full range of what Howard Gardner identifies as our innate multiple intelligences, stimulating and motivating parents, children and the wider community to see learning as an ongoing, life-course enterprise.

So any public-private partnership funding would be designed to link schooling with human services, link

government departments to local government, with children's administrative services wider than those that current school principals can provide. Principals would not necessarily be administrators but rather staff mentors, learning experts, setting the tone for what happens in every classroom, and they would have managers for the bureaucratic hack work.

The Bracks Government espouses a whole-of-government approach, has a Department for Victorian Communities aimed at community-building, has several urban renewal projects and reforms of children's services aimed at better linking local government, human services and the community services sector. All this could inform a major renewal of our antiquated approach to education, combining funds from several departments, public and private resources so the whole community is better served.

Article for reflection and discussion 2
Parents should be seen as 'customers'
Source: The Age, August 7, 2006
Posted: 22-08-2006

Article by Chee Chee Leung

Victoria's government schools can learn important lessons about accountability and customer service from private schools, according to Education Minister Lynne Kosky.

The minister is set to tell school leaders at a Victorian Principals Association conference today that more should be done to meet parents' expectations.

"If you look at some of the high-performing independent schools ... they are very clear about the customer, in a sense, being both the student but also the parents," Ms Kosky said.

"Particularly if a child is falling a little bit behind, the parents have the confidence that they will get fairly immediate contact, and I think we need to look at ways we can do that across the system."

She also acknowledged that some parents might be sending their children to independent schools because they felt such schools were more accountable.

Parents should be given regular updates — beyond the traditional parent-teacher interviews and report cards — about what their children are learning, their results and attendance, she said.

Advances in technology would help schools become more accountable, with some government schools already providing detailed information about children to their parents via the school website, Ms Kosky said.

She said that while many public schools were successfully meeting parents expectations, there needed to be greater consistency across the state.

Website: The Age Website

Appendix D

Case study schools

A number of schools with strong school –community links were identified as part of this work. Conversations and visits were made to eight schools. Detailed information is provided on three schools that were outstanding in terms of their connectedness with their families and children despite being located in very complex and diverse communities characterized by high levels of social and economic disadvantage. The three schools located in North Western Melbourne, outer suburban Darwin and South Western Sydney were truly exemplary models of strong home-school-community connectedness by national and international standards. Each school was characterized by trust, mutual respect, high academic expectations and targeted, personalized learning programs for each child. Building trust began well *before* children started school with early learning and parent support activities. Each school has a strong sense of respect for families and recognition that they *are* and *should be* at the centre of their children's lives. The schools were considered community "hubs" with playgroups, out-of-school-care, and a range of services such as clothing pools, "swap-shops" and activities and spaces (such as parents' rooms) for children and families. Each had demonstrably improved academic outcomes for students that were attributable to their sense of "connectedness" with children and with families. At the classroom level each of the schools provided meaningful and intellectually challenging material relevant and connected to children's lives, recognised that children learn in different ways and have different needs. Classroom programs focused on giving children more immediate and longer term control over their lives through explicitly and personally strengthening social and intellectual skills. Each school had high expectations for children in terms of their social competence and behaviour and had well defined "discipline" and pastoral care policies. Leadership in each school was "outstanding" with each principal described as energetic, supportive, dedicated, inspirational and socially entrepreneurial. Staff were considered caring, positive, competent and optimistic. All three principals shared a very strong sense of social justice. Their schools were characterised by democratic governance styles in which roles, responsibilities and rewards were distributed amongst all staff.

Each school was deeply connected with its families and anchored in its community in a day to day sense. All principals (and staff) had established personalised communication with parents. They knew each family and children and there were many activities that explicitly drew parents into the school and into their children's intellectual, social and sporting lives. Each school had a comprehensive community out reach agenda that had become integral to day to day operations. Each drew on the strengths of community leaders, agencies and volunteers to communicate with and support families and children, to bring families into the school and to enrich their programs. Principals stressed that building community trust, effective communication channels and ultimately connectedness was an ongoing process that required time, resources and an extraordinary effort on the part of all staff well above the "call of duty". These schools are all the more remarkable because each is located in an exceptionally dynamic, diverse complex community that has changed dramatically in recent years and continues to change substantially as families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds move to the area.

School 1

MB Primary School, North Western Melbourne, Victoria

If there is a definition of a "connected" school it is MB Primary School. Located in a North Western Melbourne community near the airport that has many social and economic challenges, MB Primary School has developed strong school-family-community partnerships characterized by trust, mutual respect, high academic expectations and targeted, personalized learning programs for each child. This school is very closely connected to its community. Parents, teachers and the principal and other support staff know and trust each other through relationships the begin for children start school and are nurtured and sustained as children progress through school.

Until the mid 1990s MB Primary School was characterized by poor academic results, high absenteeism, staff and student disharmony and parents who largely weren't interested and didn't care. Transforming MB Primary School to its current harmonious state with good academic results, good attendance and a satisfied and cooperative parent body is "a work in progress" that started some seven years ago and will continue for many years to come. Sustaining this level of harmony and outcomes for students is an ongoing process.

The catalyst for change and sustained improvement has been the leadership of the principal. He has initiated a raft of strategies to bring about strong learning programs for all children and a more settled, cooperative and harmonious school and classroom climate that has created a supportive haven for children and families. Most importantly, he has a positive, optimistic and socially entrepreneurial approach to issues. He actively seeks and seizes social and learning opportunities. If there is an opportunity for involvement in the community he identifies it and builds on it. He reaches out to the community and actively involves staff, parents and the community in the governance and day to day events of the school. When staff identify opportunities he positively and actively support them and their involvement. He finds ways to "make things happen". And, as one parent said: "He just loves this school".

The school has high expectations for children, a strong focus on literacy, personalized intervention programs to address learning needs, and a strong pastoral care program. These

initiatives have been reflected in demonstrably improved academic results, social harmony and a true sense of involvement with family and community.

A key to the enhanced school climate and improved student outcomes is the school's sense of openness initiated and supported by the principal and operationalised by all staff and students. MB Primary School is an 'open', welcoming school that is both a community 'hub' and an integral part of the community. There is a strong sense of respect for families and recognition that they *are* and *should be* at the centre of their children's lives.

At the heart of the school's efforts to connect with its community is a commitment to interact with families and build trust *before* children start school. An Early Learning Centre, a supported playgroup with a range of additional services, is located on the school grounds and funded and supported by a range of organisations including the school. Local families start to use this centre when their children are babies. Here they can meet informally, get to know each other, become familiar with the school environment and staff. The playgroup is led by a facilitator who has worked in and with the school for many years and who is known to families.

The school takes every possible opportunity to provide rich and sustained learning experiences for all children. It has targeted learning programs for all children including additional language programs, reading and numeracy programs and provides a range of cultural events that foster family involvement.

Visiting this school, walking around, talking with staff, children and parents conveyed a sense of satisfaction and harmony. The entry area is welcoming and the welcome carries through to the rest of the school, staff and children. The principal is outside playing ball with the children during lunch time; older children are staffing the office and answering the phone; the school garden is a hive of activity. There is a dance group in the playgroup room and lots of parents chatting and playing with toddlers and preschoolers in the Playgroup area.

Discussions with staff and parents highlighted the key role of the principal in the school, his "enthusiasm, caring and dedication" and parents' and staff's very strong sense of satisfaction with the school.

This is a school that actively listens to parents, genuinely cares about children and families and encourages them to participate in a variety of activities on a regular, often daily basis. It has harnessed community resources to support student learning and in doing so has embedded the school in its local community

About the school community

MB Primary School is located in a high needs community in North Western Melbourne. About 92%-98% of families rely on welfare benefits and most live in public housing. Over a thousand children attended the school when it first opened in the mid 1950s. It now has 170 students. In the last two decades the population of the area has changed and declined gradually. The military base closed and many houses were empty and occupied by squatters. In the mid 80s a new wave of immigrant families began to move into the area. The community is now culturally and linguistically diverse with about 65% of families having English as an additional language. The main non- Anglo groups represented in the school are from Turkish, Lebanese, Syrian, Pacific Islander and Vietnamese backgrounds.

Family and community context

Families in the area have a long history of reliance on social welfare. Most children (90%) receive the *Education Maintenance Allowance*. Many families have complex issues that impact negatively on parenting and children's well being. Most families receive welfare payments and struggle to provide for their children. Many are transient but equally many are well established. A major problem in recent years had been the unacceptable behaviour of many children *and* parents. Not a day went past without the principal and teachers dealing with cases of bullying, fights between children and angry and abusive parents. Today, the school has a calm, harmonious atmosphere, a strong pastoral care program, and the principal might deal with an angry, hostile parent once or twice a year. Because families are "part of the school", know teachers personally, and are actively involved with classroom teachers and the principal they feel

they know what is going on, they are aware of classroom programs and can talk about issues before they become problems.

Community involvement

MB Primary School has a long history of collaboration with local service networks, but over the last five years or so, since the appointment of the current principal, the school has established links and partnerships that are more explicit and better targeted and have become integral to day to day operations.

The school has an active policy of working with community groups to build cohesiveness and tackle disadvantage. It currently collaborates with organisations and agencies as diverse as police, fire brigade, Anglicare, Gould League, CERES and the Natural Resources Conservation League of Victoria. It is a key partner in the Victorian government's Neighbourhood Renewal Program that has resulted in sustained community cooperation and improved facilities and services for local families. Last year the school was awarded the Hume Council's City Pride Award and has been nominated for Victoria's Sustainable School's Award.

Environment projects, including building school vegetable and native gardens, have provided a useful and practical vehicle for engaging students and parents.

Several indicators are used to measure the school's progress against its objectives and all show gradual and sustained progress. Key areas of improvement are in attendance, state based literacy, numeracy and science performance, retention, behaviour, and a reduction in bullying and other anti-social incidences.

Results of annual parent, staff and student surveys over the years 2003 to 2005 show high and increasing satisfaction with the school.

The percentage of students achieving at or above expected literacy and mathematics standards in years 3 and 5 has increased substantially over the past few years. In 2003 for example, just over 20% of Year 3 students had attained the expected standard. By 2005 this number had risen

to over 60%. A similar progression was noted in mathematics. After a very strong effort in mathematics, over 90% of year 5 students had achieved the expected standard.

Students' school attendance is still lower that the state average. Students miss an average of 17 days per year and over half the children were away for more than 17 days. Absences are highest in the first two years of school. It is hoped that a new program called *It's not OK to be Away* will help reduce absenteeism.

Measures of student engagement and well being required as part of Victoria's annual school assessment process, shows that students have a very high level of connectedness to the school. They enjoyed their work, found learning fun and looked forward to going to school. Student satisfaction with school has improved over the past three years.

Specific strategies to engage parents and students and build connectedness

Discussion with the principal and staff show that family engagement does not happen spontaneously or overnight. It is a result of sustained policy of involvement and day to day practices of valuing, respecting, talking to and welcoming families. Most importantly, children and families must be involved in learning programs and events that are worthwhile and meaningful.

The school employs a number of strategies to engage and connect children and families. Most of these are an integral part of the school's fabric; they are no longer considered 'special programs'.

1. Welcome all families and an open door policy

The school genuinely welcomes parents to the school. Each morning the staff room acts as a parent meeting place. Tea and coffee are provided and staff are available to talk with parents. The idea of this informal meeting space is to make parents feel comfortable with each other and with the school. Staff are available to talk about issues before they become problems. On any morning up to 30 or so parents congregate in the staff room to socialize and hear about school events, programs and day to day life. Sometimes parents stay on to help in the school.

2. Carefully planned, targeted learning programs

Carefully planned and targeted learning programs drawing on specialist help as needed, especially in literacy and numeracy, were at the heart of strengthening children's academic achievement. The school had high expectations for children and generally their above state-average performance on Grade 3 and 5 assessments showed that these targets were being met.

3. Professional development

Teachers are actively encouraged and supported to participate in professional development especially in areas that are of immediate, strategic benefit to the school. Innovative approaches to funding professional development such as accessing grants and sponsorship ensure that there are good opportunities for teacher access.

4. Support for teachers

As well as feeling valued, engaged in something "worthwhile" and supported to participate in professional learning activities, each teacher was given an extra one hour *relief-from-face-to-face- teaching* in recognition of the time taken to interact with parents on a one-to-one basis.

5. Building student responsibility and skills

The school has many strategies to build student skills and confidence but one that stands out is the system that runs the school front office at lunch time. Each lunchtime the school office is staffed by two students who have had training in answering the phone and dealing with other enquiries. Staffing operates on a roster system and students work in the office about once or twice a month.

6. Pre-school and transition to school

The pre-primary, Early Learning Centre program is a core plank in connecting families. It operates on the premise that families need to be involved and active in their children's learning and development well before school starts.

The pre-primary program started as a supported play group in the late 1970s and has grown to provide a strong, rich base for families and children that offers a range of joined-up seamless and

unobtrusive support and services for families. The centre and programs are funded and provided by a range of services and convened by an inspiring facilitator M.L. Children begin playgroup as toddlers and progress to a four year old group in the year before school. Most children in this community would not normally attend formal preschool services. The playgroup enables children and their parents to participate in scaffolded developmental experiences including early literacy and problem solving, and learn about healthy eating, and managing behaviour. There are a range of agencies and volunteers involved in the centre including Speech Therapists provided by Anglicare, community health nurses, community leaders who provide dance and other creative activities, and students from various universities and TAFE colleges.

Summary

MB Primary School has made a real difference to children and families. Through strong, inspired leadership that has initiated and supported community involvement, and collaboration it has brought families into the school and taken the school to the community. Parents are engaged as active partners and empowered to support their children's learning.

The school is a leader in accessing government and non government services and bringing them to the school in joined-up way. The Early Learning Centre has become a hub for families to access a range of services that would be otherwise difficult to reach. Improvements in education have acted as catalysts for sustained empowerment for parents.

School 2.
MP Primary School, Darwin, NT

In discussions about schools that were "connected" with their communities MP Primary School in one of Darwin's outer suburbs stood out as an exemplary school operating in a diverse, highly mobile and largely socially and economically disadvantaged community with a significant Indigenous population.

MP Primary School is located in a Darwin suburb characterised by high unemployment, a transient population, and a range of poverty related problems such as family violence. The school has some 410 students about 40% of whom are from Indigenous backgrounds. Darwin has a highly mobile population generally, but the most disadvantaged families tend to congregate in this area, and particularly in and around the suburb in which this school is located.

The school stands out from others in similarly disadvantaged communities because of its unique role as a community "hub". The school is designated a "Comprehensive Service Project" school meaning that a comprehensive range of child and family services are provided on site. Co-located are a community child care centre (Sxxx), a preschool, play group, new mothers' group, before and after school care and a range of health services and welfare services, including a Community Liaison Officer.

For families who remain in the area for long enough, these centrally located services offer continuity and on-going support. As these services are at the very core of a community and families have a chance to meet each other and the school staff on an informal basis well before children start school. Children and parents can move seamlessly between parents groups, playgroups, early childhood programs and school. Health and welfare services provide both support and a safety net for families in need. A number of non government agencies are actively involved with parenting and early childhood programs and the school to help engage families and children. The Red Cross for example, runs the Breakfast Program. Helping to coordinate the many services operating from within the school and across the community and to work with individual children and families as a conduit to the school is a Community Liaison Officer.

Leadership.

Standing out in this school is the leadership of the principal and key support staff. Despite the location of formal support services on site it was apparent that services alone do not constitute a "community". In fact, despite "comprehensive" formal community services on site, the school had struggled for many years to engage with parents, and improve children's social competence and academic outcomes. By all accounts it was a "failing" school until the arrival of the current principal some seven years ago.

The present principal is widely regarded as "inspiring figure" who people want to engage and work with. Other senior staff are considered equally "inspirational" and it seems they have been drawn to the school largely because of the principal who by all accounts has "turned around" a school that was "spiraling into disaster". Clearly, simply co-locating facilities on the one site does not make or engage a "community".

The principal and executive staff work collaboratively with other community agencies to ensure that support services are meeting families needs and that families are engaged with them and with each other and most importantly, engaged with their children's learning and development and the school.

The principal is regarded as a person who "finds ways to make things happen". He was described as positive, optimistic, energetic and socially entrepreneurial. He actively and explicitly seeks opportunities to reach out to the community and capitalizes on them. He enthusiastically, positively and pro-actively supports staff and their efforts to engage with children and their families. The principal and staff have developed strong personal connections with families. They know each child and each child's parents.

The task of actively "welcoming" children and families to the school and making them seem valued is explicit and ongoing. Each (or most) mornings the principal waits at the gate and greets each child and family as they arrive at school.

Conversations in this school promoted the idea that "teachers have to live the values" and ethos of the school. Engaging with children and families has to be integral to the school's philosophy and day to day pedagogy. Engagement and connectedness does not come about through stand-alone "programs". Schools need to embed a variety of activities and strategies in everyday teaching and learning programs.

Across the board, this school had a settled, cooperative and harmonious "feel" about it that provides a stable, supportive "haven" for children where they and their families genuinely feel welcome. Physically, it was bright, clean, and attractive with well maintained entry displays, gardens, garden art and sculptures, and garden furniture.

Of interest in discussions with the Community Liaison Office were plans to further strengthen community capacity to empower families to better support their children, including lobbying for a change to the mix of housing type in the area. It was clear from conversations that connecting with community is a continuous process. It is by no means a one-off affair.

Staffing

The NT is characterized by extremely high staff turnover. About 25% of staff leave each year. This is caused by a combination of factors, including personal and family reasons (about 80% of NT teaching staff come from outside the territory) and because territory teaching can be extremely difficult. Some NT classes, especially in remote communities, have 3 and 5 teachers per semester. Until the staff development and school renewal programs initiated at MP Primary School were part of the fabric of the school, staff turnover was as high as in other disadvantaged NT schools. Today, the school has just one or two staff leaving each year and staff actively seek employment at the school. This continuity means that learning programs and pastoral care initiatives have a chance to develop and strengthen.

The child care centre

SXXX is a community child care centre with 54 places. It is run for and by the community, as opposed to the more common commercial or private-for-profit child care centre model. The centre caters mainly for children of working parents, but other children also use the centre.

Unique to this setting, the school has an active role in management of the centre with a senior staff member chairing the Management Committee. Until recently the centre was experiencing severe financial difficulties and was threatened with closure. "Creative thinking" that also served to connect various aspects of the community turned it around and it now "breaks even". As in most child care centres, a cook was employed to prepare children's meals. As this was not proving economical the cook's position was expanded to become full-time and also include management of the school canteen, food preparation for the out-of-school-care centre and vacation care, and general catering for the co-located services. Combining these services has proved financially viable as well as strengthening collaboration and connections across the school, preschool, child care centre and outside school hours care centre.

Close connections between the child care centres, preschool and school extend to joint planning meetings, sharing professional development, social and various school-related functions. Families are better supported in their parenting and children have the continuity of experience that provides trust, stability and familiarity and shared expectations.

Indicators of success

Indicators of the success of the school's initiative to provide meaningful curricula and build stronger relations with families were evidenced in terms of improvements in

Basic skill (MAP) performance

Reductions in staff turnover

Significant increases and continuing improvements in student attendance

Better student retention

Reductions in bullying and anti-social behaviours

Reductions in suspensions

Reductions in illicit substance abuse

Significant increases in participation in school events

High and increasing parent satisfaction with the school as measured by Parent Statisfaction Survey results and reductions in parent complaints and irate and abusive parents.

High and increasing staff satisfaction with the school as measured by Staff Satisfaction Survey results.

Summary

In summary, personal relationships with families, a rich, strong curriculum and pedagogy and a dedicated inspirational principal seem to hold the key to this school's connectedness with its community.

School 3
BN Public School, South Western Sydney

I'd heard that BN Public School was a learning and community "beacon" in a part of Sydney typically believed to have considerable community disharmony, particularly after the racially and ethnically oriented problems that made news headlines in late 2005. A visit to the school and conversations with the principal, staff and parents confirmed this school does indeed provide a program that celebrates and values diversity and draws strength from its families and community and is deeply connected with its children, families and community.

BN Public School has about 350 children and is located in South Western Sydney in a culturally and linguistically diverse community with substantial pockets of social and economic disadvantage. Most children are from Middle Eastern, North Asian or Islander backgrounds. The school employs a number of teachers and support staff with relevant linguistic backgrounds and ESL skills.

The principal has been at the school for a number of years and is well respected and anchored in the community. As the demographic and cultural character of the community has changed substantially in the last decade of so, and continues to change, the processes of communicating and connecting with families and the wider community must also change to meet family needs. The current high level of connectedness amongst children and teachers and the school and families is a result of sustained efforts to value and, respect families, to build trust and to talk with them and genuinely embrace the strengths embedded in their diversity.

The school employs a number of strategies to engage and connect with its student body and with families. These strategies are now so embedded in the school's fabric; that they are no longer considered "special programs". The school's efforts to support and communicate with families fall into three main categories:

1. Welcoming and respecting all families

2. Carefully planned, targeted learning programs

3. Supporting transition to school

4. School Leadership and governance

1. Welcoming and respecting all families

A range of small group and larger group activities to welcome and meet parents are held on a regular basis. Most importantly, families meet in the school on a daily basis when they deliver children to school. Mothers with younger children participate in the playgroup. The principal and teachers are highly visible in the playground when parents are in and around the school. The school runs many events to help build parent capacity- including assisting with homework, parent computer classes and parenting support programs. Parents are personally and regularly invited into the school and classrooms to observe their children. There are regular social events for families that are linked to school events such as cultural events and school concerts.

2. Carefully planned, targeted learning programs across all curriculum areas including special support for students with early reading difficulties.

Additional, "enrichment" activities that act to engage children and their families include:

A performing arts programs with a celebrated School Choir that performs regularly and successfully including at major events such as the Olympic Games.

A community language program offering Arabic, Chinese and Greek language tuition.

A gymnastics and a dance program

Specialised and targeted support for non-English speaking background students and those with learning disabilities

Complementing a well targeted curriculum is clear sense of harmony, tolerance and personalized communication with families. For example, parents and teachers have regular formal and informal conversations about children's progress. The principal and staff are highly visible around the school during the day and before and after school to talk with children and parents. There is a strong parent presence in and around the school especially in the morning when parents, mostly mothers, meet under the large trees and chat for some time after children go into class. Later

those with younger children may attend the playgroup. An extensive parent and volunteer helper program supports students within classrooms, especially in reading.

Part of the parent and community focus in the school is on building parent capacity. This is achieved by building parents' confidence in themselves and in their efforts to support their children's learning. The school runs a very successful "parent development" program and has been exceptionally successful in attracting parents to workshops and information sessions, especially where there is a clear educational benefit to both children and parents. Recent computer and internet workshops have been especially popular with one having some 60 participants.

The school has been explicit in developing and promoting a strong pastoral care and "discipline system." It school an explicit and well articulated "discipline system" that supports the "rights of all students". It has an incentive system rewarding and acknowledging student achievement, a Kinder Buddy Program that pairs year 5 and 6 students with new Kinder children, and implementation of a school uniform policy. The strong focus on "discipline" is well regarded by parents and has resulted in a harmonious, tolerant and inclusive school environment.

3. Supporting transition to school

BN Public School operates on the premise that families need to be involved and active in their children's learning and development well before school starts. To this end the school has well established links with local preschool, child care and early intervention services. Most importantly it runs a supported playgroup that caters for local families with young children. The playgroup is promoted through the school newsletter, but more effectively perhaps through a large banner in the school grounds and word-of mouth.

This is a school that overtly and unashamedly cares about and supports its community and sees the playgroup as a key part of its outreach. Staff listen actively to parents, genuinely care about children and families, initiate personal contact with families through letters and phone calls and personal conversations and encourage them to participate in a variety of activities on a regular,

often daily basis. Parents said that the principal is "always available. He is always around somewhere or we just go to his door; there is no need for an appointment."

"He helps us a lot". He just gets things done- quickly and practically. There is no fuss. . .

Together, the school and the playgroup have harnessed other community resources to support young children's development and transition to school. At parents' request, and especially for the many children who do not attend pre-school, the playgroup provides formal school "readiness" activities, including computer-based learning experiences in early literacy and maths. These are facilitated by parents but a play group support worker (Jxxxx) is also employed to set up the play group. The support and assistance provided to parents is obviously valued because the playgroups leader Jxxxx was described as "an angel", "fantastic" and "wonderful". Importantly, because the playgroup is part of the school parents feel they know what is going on and can talk about issues before they become problems.

Primary School conveys a real sense of "belonging. Parents said they feel welcome and supported. They feel that they "know" their child's teacher and the principal and that they care about their children. They speak effusively about the principal and staff and the many ways they feel supported in their parenting and efforts to assist their children's development and learning. As one parent said- "this school changes lives." Equally, this sense of belonging and connectedness is necessary for parents to gain the confidence needed to support their children's learning and contribute to the school. Both parents and staff stressed that meeting both learning and social and emotional needs is essential if children are to attain the independence and sense of autonomy to achieve their potential.

School Leadership and governance

Conversations with teachers and parents indicated the incredibly high regard in which the principal was held. His leaderships was described as strong, democratic, sensitive, supportive and inspired. It has drawn teachers to the school, kept staff turnover low, brought families into the school and taken the school to the community. Parents are supported in their parenting and have become active partners in their children's learning. The principal credited with considerable

creativity in drawing on the local community to support school initiatives such as breakfast programs, musical events and the playgroup and finding grants and "tracking down resources where apparently none exist"

Specific attributes mentioned in regard to the school principal and to other school leaders included their

Credibility,
Creativity and motivational qualities
Future orientation
Political nous
A good understanding of pedagogy and how to support students' learning
Supportive and encouraging of ICT use
Good standing in the community
Likable, warm and caring
Ability to see all points of view and understand the likely impacts of decisions
Ability to driving innovation
Competent and energetic
Ability and initiative to engage with people and organisations outside the school
Willingness to have a go

In terms of governance style the BN Public School was described as "democratic" and "participatory" with a whole school approach to planning, implementation and monitoring of teaching and learning programs, a team focused approach leading to common goals; and a strong focus on the high expectations with good support and a shared vision and commitment to learning and progress for all children. Overwhelmingly, there was a sense that staff felt "part of something worthwhile". "Relationships" with staff, with parents and with children were something to be valued and nourished. School governance and management was interactive and characterized by collaboration and shared decision making. The principal's style was described as one that "empowered", "supported" and "motivated" staff and actively involved them in the complex decision making now so common in schools. At the same time, he took the lead role in key areas leaving teachers to focus on day to day classroom roles. There was strong support for professional learning for staff but this was curtailed somewhat by limited funding. Already funding had "run out" in the school. Perhaps the only somewhat negative view was that resourcing the school's enriched curricula and out-reach work required executive staff to be on a "submission writing treadmill" to find enough funding or other support to keep programs running and to

develop new initiatives to meet changing needs. The recent start of a new African dance groups and the need for extra ICT resources had presented recent challenges for staff and for parents.

Improved student outcomes

A major indicator of the extent to which a school is connected with its community is its assessment against its objectives and benchmarks. At BM Public School the following indicators were deemed important in monitoring student achievement and progress. In each case the school had met or exceeded its goals with students performing above the state average in terms of attendance and performance in the Basic Skills tests and consistently few incidences of bullying and other anti social behaviours.

Indicator	Progress
Records of attendance, absenteeism and lateness	Improving and Better than state average
Uniform compliance	Good
Homework completion	Good
Progress in Basic Skills Test Literacy and Numeracy in. Year 3 and 5	Improving and generally on par with state average
Participation in school events	Excellent support for and participation in school events
Incidence of bullying	Rare
Parent satisfaction with teaching and school climate	Good support for school performance
Retention rates, student mobility	Low student turnover

Summary

By any standards, BN Public School is well connected with its families and community. It has developed a climate that values warm, close relationships with parents and children. The parents and children are known personally to the principal and they find him (and other staff) warm, caring and "always there for them." Standing out most in this school was the quality of interpersonal relationships between school staff and children and families together with the integrity, personal focus and quality of pedagogy in classrooms. Conversations in the school highlighted that building trust with families, listening to them and supporting their parenting was a long term and on-going process that required commitment to continuous improvement in the light of changing circumstances such as population shifts. The school worked hard to communicate with and engage families in learning; but first it listened to them and sought to meet their needs.

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