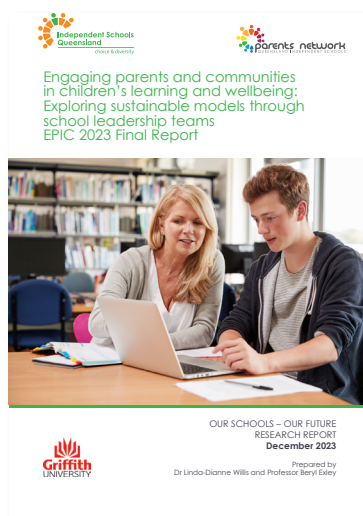


Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

VOLUME 28 | ISSUE 1

ENGAGING PARENTS FOR STUDENT (AND SCHOOL) SUCCESS



EPIC 2023 Final Report. *Engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing: Exploring sustainable models through school leadership teams.*

Foreword

As we navigate the dynamic landscape of education, one truth remains constant: parents are indispensable partners in their child's educational journey. In Queensland's independent schools, the concept of parent engagement has emerged as a strategic imperative, recognising the pivotal role parents play in shaping the holistic development of our students.

What is parent engagement? Parent engagement is families and schools working together in partnership and respecting each other's unique roles in nurturing young minds. When schools authentically engage parents and carers, the entire educational ecosystem thrives. Students flourish, teachers find renewed purpose, and communities reap the rewards.

Research underscores the transformative impact of informed and engaged parents. When parents understand their child's classroom experiences and actively contribute to their learning journey, remarkable outcomes can unfold. Students supported by engaged parents tend to do better academically. Their grasp of subject matter deepens, and their thirst for knowledge grows. Engaged parents also model and foster a commitment to education and children tend to stay in school longer, driven by a shared sense of purpose. Additionally, students are often more engaged in homework, have better behaviour, and have better social skills.

In this research article, Amanda Watt, Executive Director of the Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network, and Jacky Dawson, Project Manager Parent Engagement, delve into the essence of successful parent engagement. They unpack some simple, yet practical strategies for busy teachers, offering examples of meaningful collaboration. Parent engagement is not a one-sided affair - it calls for shared responsibility. Schools and families benefit when they join forces, recognising that each possesses unique skills and contributions.

Parent engagement is backed by more than 50 years of research and that cumulative research shows that effectively engaging parents can not only enhance students' achievement, it is also a vital ingredient in high performing schools, and may lead to better wellbeing outcomes for students, families and educators.



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ENGAGING PARENTS FOR STUDENT (AND SCHOOL) SUCCESS



AMANDA WATT
Executive Director,
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Parents Network

At times, parents become frustrated if they receive limited information about what happens once their child passes through the school gates. School leaders and teachers can also experience stress associated with parents holding what they consider to be unrealistic expectations.

So... what if there was a way of parents partnering with schools on their child's education and wellbeing journey? What if educators viewed parents – and parents viewed educators – as important allies with whom they shouldered a shared responsibility? What if a new dynamic could be powered by positive two-way communication and respect between home and school?



JACKY DAWSON
Program Manager,
Parent Engagement

Decades of research – and recent evidence-based work in Queensland independent schools – shows us there is a way of achieving this in school communities and it's through the (gradual, considered, ongoing and reflective) process of 'parent engagement'.

Parent engagement is backed by more than 50 years of research and that cumulative research shows that effectively engaging parents can not only enhance students' achievement, it is also a vital ingredient in high performing schools, and may lead to better wellbeing outcomes for students, families and educators.

As a result, governments – and school leaders – are taking notice and making parent engagement a priority.

Parent engagement: a re-cap

Parent engagement is families and schools working in partnership with a shared goal of helping students achieve their potential, all the while respecting each other's unique roles in a child's education. We know a parent can't replace a teacher and a teacher can't replace a parent, however both bring important contributions.

When parents are engaged – effectively and sustainably – and scaffolded by their child's teacher/s in the ways they might value-add to classroom learning, they are given the opportunity to draw on their own life experiences and knowledge of their child to follow through on that request.

While parents volunteering in the tuckshop, helping on an excursion, or sitting in the audience at a school information night represent important ways for a parent to show their support to a school (vital for relationship building), parent engagement initiatives and practices are distinct as they are tied to a child's learning and wellbeing.

Respected Canadian parent engagement advocate Debbie Pushor (2023) says engagement is able to flourish when schools and families have strong and productive relationships and communicate well but stresses parent engagement (focused on teaching and learning) is distinct from parent involvement (focused on serving the school's agenda), parent advocacy (focused on issues) and parent lobbying (focused on policy change).

Pushor (2023) states:

The key to parent engagement... is building authentic, respectful, and reciprocal relationships. When schools, educators, and parents work together, sharing their knowledge of children, teaching, and learning, the impact can be significant, leading to improved outcomes for students, parents and teachers and to strengthened school communities.

The evidence

Improved student achievement and wellbeing are of course compelling benefits to motivate any school improvement activity.

Leading Australian parent engagement researchers, Griffith University's Dr Linda Willis and Professor Beryl Exley, who worked alongside schools in the Queensland independent sector from 2021–2023 as part of a special ISQ parent engagement research project, note (2023) "the notion of parent engagement is recognised nationally and internationally as integral and essential for student success academically, socially, and emotionally, while simultaneously considered a fundamental aspect of successful schools" (p. 12).

Fellow Australian researchers Barbara Barker and Diana Harris (2020) who wrote the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) report, *Parent and Family Engagement: an implementation guide for school communities*, point to the overwhelmingly positive benefits to students when parents are engaged – such as improvements in student attendance, behaviour, homework and achievement.

Barker and Harris (2020) state:

Parent and family engagement in learning is based on an understanding that while children learn in all kinds of different environments, at the centre of

those interrelated systems is the dynamic between parent and children. Child-parent interactions that nurture positive attitudes towards learning, confidence as learners, and the development of subjective learning resources, equip children to succeed. (p. 12)

A recent meta-analysis of previous studies by American Professor of Education William Jaynes (2023) also noted it was apparent that parental engagement can have a powerful impact on children's educational and behavioural outcomes.

Meta-analyses completed over the last 20 years indicate "the effects of parental involvement [on student achievement] amount to almost a full grade point, for example, the difference between a B and a C" (Jaynes in Willis & Exley, 2023, page 8).

Wellbeing benefits for teachers, too, were among some of the strong anecdotal findings to emerge from Independent School Queensland's 2021–2023 research project *Engaging Parents in Curriculum (EPIC)*. (Willis, Exley & Daffurn, 2021; Willis & Exley, 2022; Willis & Exley, 2023).

EPIC – a collaboration between ISQ, Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network and Griffith University – evaluated and supported parent engagement practices at independent schools of various sizes and geographic locations in Queensland and showed that engaging parents not only works, it doesn't need to be complicated and can be "enriching for teachers' practice and wellbeing". (Willis in Independent Schools Queensland, 2022)

In his book *Engage Every Family*, American family engagement author and speaker, Dr Steven Constantino (2016) urged that parent engagement

not be "relegated to the end of the list of important reforms we must enact" (p. 209).

Constantino wrote:

We spend millions of professional development dollars searching for those ideas that will bring us success with every student – a success that still eludes us.

In all of this, the notion of family engagement, that empowering the first and most influential teachers of children, seems to somehow get lost. We simply cannot let that continue to happen (p. 210).

The UK's Dr Janet Goodall from the University of Swansea is a leading parental engagement academic and consultant and has been at the forefront of parent engagement research for almost 20 years.

Describing how parents can make a difference, Goodall (2015) wrote "it's what happens in the home and the car, and everywhere else that children are during the 75% of their time when they are not in school, that makes the difference."

Speaking to Australian educators via webinar, Goodall (2022) described parental engagement with children's learning as "the best lever we have for increasing achievement for all our children, but it requires a change to how we train teachers, and their understanding of parents' place in the learning process."

Practices that transform the parent-teacher relationship are needed, according to the authors of the recent parent engagement book *Everyone Wins! The Evidence for Family-School Partnerships and Implications for Practice* (2022).

"Child-parent interactions that nurture positive attitudes towards learning, confidence as learners, and the development of subjective learning resources, equip children to succeed."

BARKER AND HARRIS (2020)

ENGAGING PARENTS FOR STUDENT (AND SCHOOL) SUCCESS

TABLE 1: AUSTRALIAN PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS

APST	Graduate	Proficient	Highly Accomplished	Lead
3.7	Describe a broad range of strategies for involving parents/carers in the educative process.	Plan for appropriate and contextually relevant opportunities for parents/carers to be involved in their children's learning.	Work with colleagues to provide appropriate and contextually relevant opportunities for parents/carers to be involved in their children's learning.	Initiate contextually relevant processes to establish programs that involve parents/carers in the education of their children and broader school priorities and activities.
5.5	Demonstrate understanding of a range of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers and the purpose of keeping accurate and reliable records of student achievement.	Report clearly, accurately and respectfully to students and parents/carers about student achievement, making use of accurate and reliable records.	Work with colleagues to construct accurate, informative and timely reports to students and parents/carers about student learning and achievement.	Evaluate and revise reporting and accountability mechanisms in the school to meet the needs of students, parents/carers, and colleagues.
7.3	Understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively, and confidentially with parents/carers.	Establish and maintain respectful collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing.	Demonstrate responsiveness in all communications with parents/carers about their children's learning and wellbeing.	Identify, initiate, and build on opportunities that engage parents/carers in both the progress of their children's learning and in the educational priorities of the school.

Mapp et al. (2022) wrote that while “traditional forms” of family engagement like volunteer programs, back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences are useful, “they are not designed to develop the trust that is essential for real partnership” (p. 26). Schools also need to embrace practices that can transform the parent-teacher relationship:

- Students feel supported and reassured when the most important adults in their lives are working together to help them learn.
- Teachers obtain insights into their students' strengths and challenges, which helps them tailor instruction and spark interest.
- Families gain skills and confidence in helping their children learn and working within the school system.
- Schools become more welcoming and inclusive, which leads to more participation from families, changing the school climate in ways that benefit everyone. (p. 26–27)

We need to embrace practices that can transform the parent-teacher relationship. That means moving away from formal and reticent relationships, and toward wholehearted, equitable collaboration between partners who understand and respect each other...

During these conversations adults get to know and recognise each other as fully founded human beings, which has a positive ripple effect on students, teachers, families and schools:

The totality of research is compelling and is undoubtedly why parent engagement is rapidly moving from a ‘nice to have’ – to a fundamental feature of high performing schools.

The Australian lens

Parent engagement has been a national priority for Australian governments for more than a decade (Willis & Exley 2023).

“The imperative emanates from the cumulative weight of research evidence that consistently shows engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing benefits students, parents, teachers, schools, and the broader society” (Willis, Exley, 2023, p. 3).

This priority is also recognised in the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, endorsed by Australia's Education Ministers, which acknowledges “parents, carers and families as the first and most important educational influence in a child's life” (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019. p. 6).

The Mparntwe declaration also confirmed the importance of schools working in partnership with parents, carers and families to support a child's progress through early learning and school.

The expectation that Australian school leaders and teachers utilise effective parent engagement practices was cemented in December 2010 with the endorsement of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Principal Standard and Teacher Standards. Parent engagement is featured as one of the professional practices in the Principal Standard and three of the seven Teacher Standards.

As expected, teachers need to demonstrate increasing proficiency as they progress along the continuum to the Highly Accomplished and Lead stages (Table 1).

The Australian Government's Review of the National School Reform Agreement (2022) found schools supporting parents to actively engage with their child's education was one of five features of the school learning environment “widely accepted as being critical for meeting the learning needs of students from priority equity cohorts” (p. 38).

The Australian Government's Initial Teacher Education (ITE) review (2022) also called on a greater focus in ITE programs on the Teacher Standards relating to parent engagement.

The national spotlight returned to parent engagement in 2023 when the Australian Senate's Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into the rising trend of school refusal across all education sectors made a recommendation calling for education authorities to work together to develop and promote resources to support effective family engagement.

The Senate Committee final report (2023) suggested this include the “provision of specialist family engagement support staff in schools” (Recommendation 10).

“The imperative emanates from the cumulative weight of research evidence that consistently shows engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing benefits students, parents, teachers, schools, and the broader society.”

WILLIS AND EXLEY (2023, P.3)

Moving from the ‘why’ to the ‘how’

So what does successful parent engagement look like and how do you achieve it in a busy school, when teachers are already doing so much?

Parent engagement experts agree there is no set way for a school to adopt a culture of parent and family engagement as every school community has a unique community and context.

Willis and Exley (2022) note parent engagement “is not about teacher checklists, or tricks and tips, or a single event, or even a series of events. It is a journey” (p. 46).

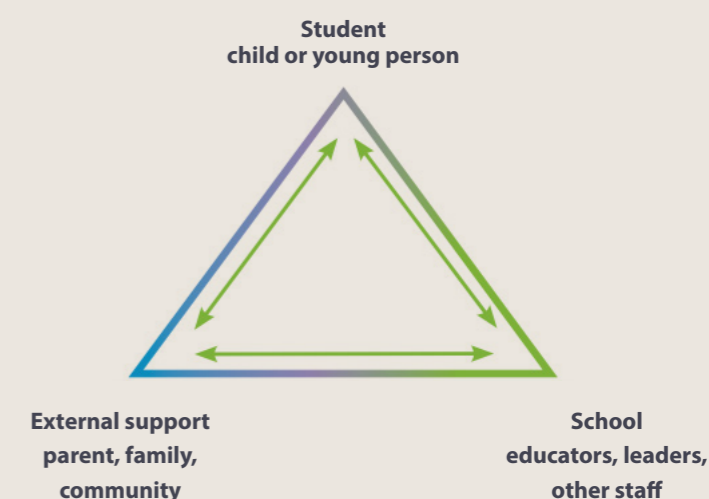
Barker and Harris (2020) agree there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach and schools “must embed appropriate structures and provide the resources and supports required by their staff (educators and others) to sustain family engagement practices over the long-term” (p. 7).

Given that parent and family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of children's development and educational attainment, it makes sense for schools and parents to work in tandem to improve educational achievement and reduce equity gaps.

A shared responsibility means that parents share responsibility, with educators, for children's learning and we acknowledge that parent engagement happens both at home AND at school. Parents and schools interact in the best interests of that child, and in this sense are equal partners (p. 13)

Barker and Harris (2020) provide this model (Figure 1) to conceptualise the relationships essential to embedding effective parent engagement.

FIGURE 1: THE ENGAGEMENT TRIANGLE



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How Queensland independent schools are approaching parent engagement

ISQ's EPIC project produced valuable analysis of parent engagement in action in the Queensland independent sector.

Eight Queensland independent schools took part in EPIC in 2023 and what is clear from reading the detailed case studies in Willis and Exley's final report (2023) is that while the schools' contexts and approaches were very different, they had significant things in common by the end of the research project:

- An understanding of the distinct difference between 'involving' parents and 'engaging' with them
- Respect for parents as a child's first educator
- Buy in from school leader/s
- A core group of passionate changemakers in the school (comprising principals, teachers and parents) meeting regularly to trial innovative strategies and evaluate progress.

The findings from EPIC were consolidated into a [suite of resources for schools](#) wanting to effectively engage with parents.

School leadership was identified as one of the essential contributors to effective school-wide engagement initiatives.

In EPIC's *Engaging Parents: Ideas for School Leaders* snapshot document (Willis, Exley, & Daffurn, 2021) school leaders were described as playing a "key role in engaging parents as they set the tone and establish a culture of parent engagement at all levels of the school".

Specific recommendations for school leaders were:

1. Create leadership roles with a specific focus on engaging parents
2. Identify parent engagement champions from among parents, teachers and community members to support these leaders
3. Build teachers' professional learning for engaging parents through opportunities to learn with and alongside parents
4. Identify barriers to engaging parents at your school and develop plans to address or minimise these.
5. Capitalise on knowledge and insights of engaging parents from learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., using online platforms to speak directly to parents and students about aspects of learning, rather than only to students)
6. [Re]consider the design of school buildings and spaces (physically and virtually) for increasing the quality, frequency, ease and convenience of engaging parents
7. Ensure parent engagement opportunities are part of the school's pedagogical framework and curriculum planning templates.

Barker and Harris (2020) stress that "at its heart, parent and family engagement in learning is about relationships".

They write:

Family engagement will always need to stem from a personalised, relationships-based approach, contextualised for each setting, that changes and develops as families move through school. For this to happen successfully, schools need to embed appropriate structures, and provide the resources and supports required by their staff (educators and others) to sustain engagement practices.

As schools prioritise the time and resources for this work, we emphasise that what matters most is: a clear purpose, aligned goals, and an awareness that professional development will likely be required. We recommend schools bring staff together to engage in reflection and discuss any perceived barriers such as time and resources, professional development, and assumptions often made about families.

...As with any long-term journey, we encourage school communities to plan for sustainability. The goal of strengthening family engagement in learning is a perennial one – schools can never be 'finished' when it comes to supporting parent engagement with learning, as with each year bring a new cohort of families, students and even educators, into a school community; and additionally, children and young people change as they age, and family engagement with their learning will necessarily need to adapt to these changes. (p. 100)

Conclusion

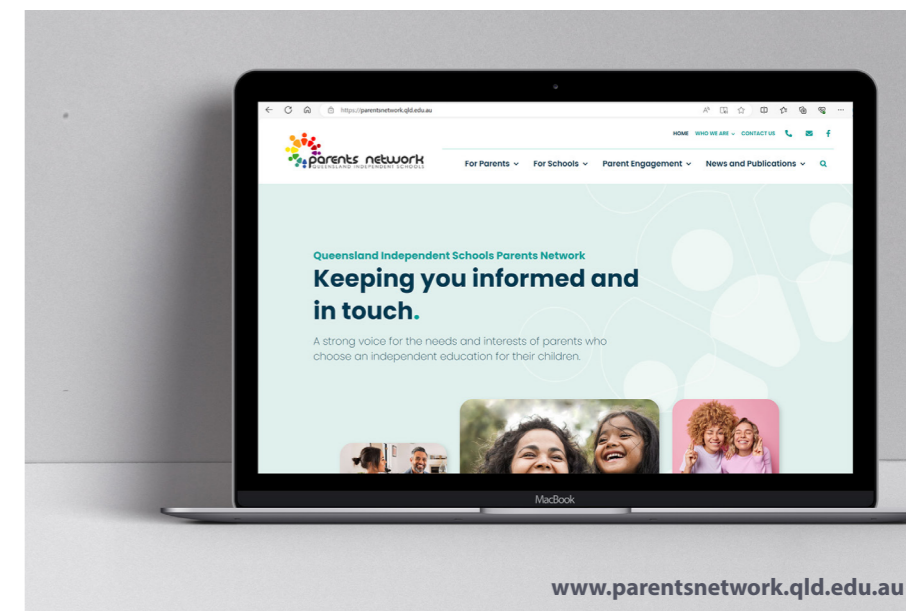
The value and impact of effective parent engagement is well established through decades of research and is rightly becoming a priority focus for schools across all educational sectors.

Evidence-based parent engagement needs to be a priority for all school leaders and tackled with a whole-school, strategic approach, with a view to making initiatives sustainable. Schools should also embed processes and mechanisms to gain regular feedback from parents and families to ascertain whether existing practices remain effective.

Constantino (2016) concedes while engaging parents "isn't the fix for all that ails the education system, it will move us closer, much closer to our goal of excellence for every student".

Families who build strong efficacy with the educational lives of their children can make a huge difference in the degree to which their children are successful at school.

The concept of family engagement is simple: involve families in the learning lives of their children and they become partners and advocates of success. (preface)



Available Support

ISQ has a new module on parent engagement. ISQ member schools can access it [here](#).

For schools seeking concentrated support on parent engagement, ISQ has a year-long scaffolded program for school leadership teams called [Mastering Parent Engagement](#). There is also a series of one-day Parent Engagement Connect professional learning opportunities planned. To enquire about support for your school, please email your enquiry to parentengagement@isq.qld.edu.au.

The [Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network](#) website contains a resource section for both schools and parents, with evidence-based guidance on how to effectively engage parents with their children's learning. The QIS Parents Network website also contains all resources resulting from the EPIC 2021–2023 research [here](#).

You can also listen to the recent [The School Bell](#) podcast which featured ISQ's parent engagement support for schools.

* EPIC ran in the Queensland independent sector for three years and is a collaboration between ISQ, Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network and Griffith University. Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network is also grateful to receive funding through the Queensland government, a significant portion of which was used to fund this important piece of longitudinal research.

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