

Modelling parent engagement: how this Brisbane principal is inspiring her teaching team

SAMFORD VALLEY STEINER SCHOOL



Tracey Taylor, Nishka Varghese, Smitha Mallya

After a year of “deep-diving” into the research around parent engagement in education, Samford Valley Steiner School director Tracey Taylor is not only convinced of its power – she’s become one of its champions.

Tracey was one of the first principals to sign her school up for Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum (EPIC) – a ground-breaking research project investigating effective parent engagement strategies in Queensland independent schools.

EPIC is a collaboration between Griffith University, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network and has been operating in six schools at various levels of intensity throughout 2021.

Leading by example

Tracey was initially slated to oversee three of her teaching staff’s involvement in the EPIC research but was so inspired by early program events she put her hand up to incorporate parent engagement strategies into the Year 12 philosophy class she teaches.

“The opportunity we were given to deep dive into the research on parent engagement was absolutely a unique chance for us to learn so much more and explore new ways of working with parents,” Tracey, a Steiner education teacher and leader for 25 years, said.

“The weekly follow-up phone calls from the researchers were another essential part of the project and gave us the opportunity to get feedback and receive evidence-based suggestions on other things to try.

“At one point I was struggling with how to manage a particular classroom project and the researchers said ‘put it out to your parents’. I did and the parents came forward and that led to a wonderful outcome.

“Often we don’t think to ask parents for help but really they are just waiting there in the wings.”

Simple strategies, well executed

The EPIC approach is to take existing curriculum planning and think of ways to encourage parents’ engagement in what is being taught, so parents can value-add to what is being taught in the classroom.

Research over many decades shows when parents and teachers work together in this way, children’s academic outcomes and wellbeing lift.

Tracey and her three teaching colleagues approached EPIC in their own unique contexts and across different curriculum areas.

In Tracey’s case, one of her approaches was to ask the parents of her Year 12 philosophy students to supply their favourite philosophical quote, which opened up conversations at home between students and parents.

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Professor Beryl Exley

Students were also given philosophical scenarios to discuss at home.

Parents and students validate the approach

Student Nishka Varghese said it was fun to listen to her mum Smitha Mallya's perspective.

"Having the two role figures in my life – my mum and my teacher – working together and engaged in my education has definitely made me value it," Nishka said.

Smitha also champions the parent-child-teacher collaborative approach after her exposure to EPIC.

"It felt really good to have this new conduit to engage with my youngster," Smitha said.

"It meant on an almost day-to-day basis Nishka and I were able to discuss what was happening in class and it gave us ways to start a conversation."

"I hope our experience can be an example for teachers to involve parents in their respective classrooms to enhance the learning outcomes for students."

Leadership is crucial for an effective school-wide approach

Tracey's enthusiasm for parent engagement is generating excitement through the entire Samford Valley Steiner School teaching team.

"Those of us involved in EPIC have spread the excitement through the rest of the staff; now there are more and more teachers wanting to try ideas with parent engagement," she said.

EPIC lead researcher, Griffith University's Dr Linda Willis, said their research shows very clearly that principals "leading the way" with parent engagement in the way Tracey had done was crucial if parent engagement approaches were to be effective and sustainable.

"Leadership has a fundamentally important role in parent engagement because school leaders can establish a culture of engaging parents at all levels of the school," Linda said.

"Principals can start by creating leadership roles with a specific focus on engaging parents and identify 'parent engagement champions' amongst parents, teachers and community members to support those leaders.

"Building teachers' professional learning for engaging parents through opportunities to learn with and alongside parents, is another valuable strategy."

'Short, sharp, often and optional'

Professor Beryl Exley, who has worked alongside Dr Willis on EPIC, says the important take home message for schools is that "EPIC (engaging parents in inquiry curriculum) doesn't need to be epic".

"Invitations to parents to value-add to their child's learning journey should be "short in duration, sharp in focus, offered regularly, always optional and personal to them," Beryl said.

"We can't wait to share the findings from Samford Valley Steiner Schools' work – and from the entire EPIC project – with all independent schools in Queensland."



Find the 2021 EPIC final report and accompanying resources for schools at www.isq.qld.edu.au or www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au