

# Changing the lens: how embracing parents as 'partners' has led to learning and wellbeing gains for this Queensland independent school

## FAIRHOLME COLLEGE



Fairholme College principal Dr Linda Evans second from right

At Fairholme College, an all-girls' K–12 day and boarding school in Toowoomba, parents are being invited as educational partners into their child's learning in ways that respect their unique knowledge, experiences and stories.

That powerful shift, which has taken place gradually and authentically over the past two years, is reaping dividends for teachers, students, and parents.

The change has come about in part due to Fairholme College's participation in the research project *Engaging Parents in Curriculum* (EPIC).

EPIC is a collaboration between Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ), Griffith University and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QIS Parents Network) and sees parent engagement experts Dr Linda Willis and Professor Beryl Exley work side-by-side with teachers and school leaders as they explore new ways to engage parents.

### Deepening and broadening learning

Fairholme College principal Dr Linda Evans says she is "unashamedly a convert" to the power of engaging parents in curriculum and its ability to "deepen and broaden" a school's culture around learning.

"Before EPIC, we were very comfortable with our level of parent engagement but what I realise now is we were very comfortable with volunteerism opportunities (for parents) and event opportunities (for parents)," Dr Evans says.

**"What EPIC has taught me is that parent engagement is so much more; it's about engaging parents in curriculum and learning and that has been the big shift in my understanding. It's teachers saying to students: 'your parents know a lot and what they know is legitimate in this classroom and we value it; we value their voice as well as your voice.'"**

### Bringing parents closer

When schools and teachers 'engage' parents, they draw them closer to what their child is learning at school that day, that week, that month, thereby giving parents information, ideas, and opportunities to value-add directly to that learning.

**International and Australian research over many decades shows that when schools and families work together in these ways, the effect on children can be overwhelmingly positive. Students generally: do better at school, stay in school longer, are more engaged in their learning at school and home, have improved behaviour and have better social skills.**

As a result of EPIC, Fairholme College teachers have been honing their communication with parents, ensuring any invitations to parents are "short, sharp, optional, often, personalised and with purpose" (shortened to SSOOPP) – a key finding emerging from the EPIC research.

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Invitations to parents to value-add to learning also result in greater dividends when teachers “close the loop” with parents, by sharing with them further classroom conversations, thereby keeping learning conversations alive.

EPIC research is also showing that school leadership is crucial if parent engagement practices at a school are to become sustainable.

## Parents ‘thirsty’ for positive engagement with their children

Dr Evans says she believed parents were thirsty for positive engagement with their children and teachers were well placed to facilitate and legitimise “really rich conversations” between parents and their children.

“I am convinced of the power of that, and the power lies first and foremost in the thinking of the teacher, that ‘here is an opportunity for me to create an even better learning environment for the students in this school,’” Dr Evans says.

“It’s also realising that learning is not this private relationship between teacher and students, it’s much broader.”

## School strategic plans increasingly featuring parent engagement

Parent engagement will feature in Fairholme College’s new strategic plan, and it now ripples through conversations among staff.

“It’s in discussion around the leadership table and at staff meetings and more in those casual conversations as well. I’ll say ‘so how are you going to engage parents in that?’. And that is a question I’m asking in every forum I’m sitting in.”

## Evidence-based research valued by schools

Dr Evans says the evidence-based structure of EPIC – and the regular touchpoints with the researchers throughout the year – had kept them on track.

**“The academic research that backs the EPIC project gives so much credibility to what we are doing,” she says.**

“And the opportunities we’ve had to sit with Linda and Beryl every two weeks and hear them speak and hear them give examples from research or from other practitioners does give strength to the importance of engaging our parents in their child’s learning.”



Fairholme College’s 2022 GabFest

## Spotlight: Parent engagement in practice

A popular Term One event in Fairholme College’s Year Seven English and Humanities subject is GabFest – where parents are invited to the school to view their child’s work on display.

Head of Middle School Jaye Ross was one of the teachers involved in EPIC in 2022 and quickly realised she could tweak GabFest’s format to bring parents in closer.


She added a few lines in the invitation to parents, asking them to bring an anecdote about their own childhoods which they could share with their child on the day.

“On the day of the event there were 100 year seven students and their families, and I sat there and held my breath when it came to the parents’ part in the program,” Ms Ross says.

“But then I looked around and I could see girls with their parents and grandparents talking and sharing anecdotes. I could see some parents pulling out bits of paper from their pockets and I could see girls laughing and reading and I could see the joy on everyone’s faces. I just thought: ‘Wow that was really easy for me to do but it made it far more interesting for the parents and so enjoyable for the girls.’”

Ms Ross says because of EPIC she values parents “and what they can bring into my classroom far more than I have ever done before”.

“It’s demonstrating to the girls that their parents have value, their parents’ opinions have value and there’s learning to be had both at home and at school.”



Read the research [www.isq.qld.edu.au/EPIC\\_research](http://www.isq.qld.edu.au/EPIC_research) and find the 2022 EPIC final report [www.isq.qld.edu.au](http://www.isq.qld.edu.au) or [www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au](http://www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au)