

# Small changes, big impact: how this small school brought parents closer to their children's learning

## YARRANLEA PRIMARY SCHOOL



Dr Linda Willis, Professor Beryl Exley and Principal David Costin

Yarranlea Primary School is a small, multi-age independent primary school nestled into the bushland campus of Griffith University at Mount Gravatt, in Brisbane's south.

While the school community has always been close-knit, teaching principal David Costin was curious about the burgeoning body of research that showed engaging parents in curriculum can leverage richer academic, social and emotional outcomes for students.

In 2021 David Costin enlisted Yarranlea to take part in *Engaging Parents in Curriculum* (EPIC), a new research project, and two years on, the small teaching team taking part in EPIC is celebrating the impact of small, but consistent, changes in their pedagogy.

"In a small school if you don't have engagement with your parents your support falls away, so we wanted to improve our practices and we wanted to come up with strategies that permeated throughout our staff," Mr Costin says.

**"As a result of EPIC our young teachers now know what they need to do to actively engage their parents throughout the school year and as established teachers EPIC has helped us to think about what we are doing and to try new things."**

### Experts working side-by-side with teachers

EPIC is a collaboration between Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ), Griffith University and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QIS Parents Network) and sees Griffith University 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.

Research over the past 60 years, conducted in Australia and overseas, has shown the value of parent engagement – and its potential for improving students' academic, social and emotional outcomes.

What has been missing for a long time has been the rich, practical, evidence-based examples of the 'how to' of parent engagement.

Yarranlea Primary School staff member and teaching veteran Karen Argus says as a result of her involvement in EPIC she was communicating more regularly with her students' parents and was pleased with the positive feedback she received in return.

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"Parents know their children best," Ms Argus says.

"I want to draw on what they know about their child and then bring what I know about them into play and use the knowledge of both of us.

**"I think the changes from EPIC for me have been around the strategies the researchers gave us – simple things like making sure any communication is 'short, sharp and regular'.**

"I've always been in touch with parents but often it's been once a term, whereas now I'm far more conscious of reaching out to them during the term so they know what is happening in the classroom.

"I've done that sometimes on social media, sometimes just face to face. I've had a lot of parents come back to me saying 'thank you so much for what you've done because now they know exactly where their child is at and what practical things we are doing to help them through."

## Meaningful, efficient communication

Early Years teacher Rebekah Woelz says she now knows how to "efficiently reach my parents and make it meaningful and how to reach them in a way that facilitates (additional) learning for the child."

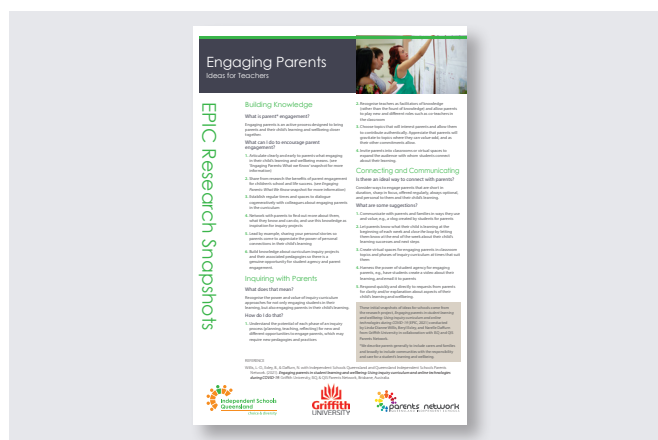
**"Engaging parents is effortless now," Ms Woelz says.**

"I had a big stigma about it (parent engagement) at the start, I thought it was more effort than it had to be. But now I think it comes down to the way you reach parents and how efficient the communication is. The outcome is so much better than how much effort it actually takes."

Colleague and fellow beginning teacher Rebecca Zouliou says being mentored to make any requests of parents "optional" was an important shift in her thinking.

"Engaging parents isn't a big effort (for teachers), maybe it's an extra sentence in an email or just a conversation at the school gate in the afternoons – but we are now embedding those strategies into everything we are doing.

"It's attempting to make those conversations that we are having at school continue at home, while being conscious of not making extra work for parents."



EPIC Research Snapshots – Engaging Parents: Ideas for Teachers

## Extract\* from EPIC Research Snapshots: Engaging Parents: Ideas for Teachers

### Connecting and Communicating

Is there an ideal way to connect with parents?

Consider ways to engage parents that are short in duration, sharp in focus, offered regularly, always optional, and personal to them and their child's learning.

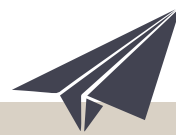
What are some suggestions?

1. Communicate with parents and families in ways they use and value, e.g., a vlog created by students for parents
2. Let parents know what their child is learning at the beginning of each week and close the loop by letting them know at the end of the

week about their child's learning successes and next steps

3. Create virtual spaces for engaging parents in classroom topics and phases of inquiry curriculum at times that suit them
4. Harness the power of student agency for engaging parents, e.g., have students create a video about their learning, and email it to parents
5. Respond quickly and directly to requests from parents for clarity and/or explanation about aspects of their child's learning and wellbeing.

\*These initial snapshots of ideas for schools come from the research project, *Engaging parents in student learning and wellbeing: Using inquiry curriculum and online technologies during COVID-19 (EPIC, 2021)* conducted by Linda-Dianne Willis, Beryl Exley, and Narelle Daffurn from Griffith University in collaboration with ISQ and QIS Parents Network.



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)