

# Parent engagement flourishing in independent schools: EPIC research project

## ST PETERS LUTHERAN COLLEGE



Miriam Bryan



Dr Linda Willis

Experienced Queensland primary school teacher Miriam Bryan has witnessed first-hand the powerful learning and wellbeing impacts on students when parents are brought closer to what is happening in the classroom.

Miriam, a Year 5 teacher at St Peters Lutheran College in Brisbane's inner-west, was one of the participants of 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 (QIS Parents Network) and operated in six independent schools in varying levels of intensity throughout 2021.

Miriam, who has been teaching for 21 years in Australia and the UK, describes her time in EPIC as “transformative” to her teaching practice.

### Final report findings 'significant'

The EPIC final report is expected to add significantly to the current body of knowledge about parent engagement in schools, both in Australia and internationally.

EPIC lead researcher Griffith University's Dr Linda Willis described the findings as “exciting – because they are so current”.

**“The fact we are in living in a Covid era has really helped us see a unique way of thinking about parent engagement that is different from what we have seen before.**

“We believe some of the results too have started to strengthen and deepen the way we have previously thought about parent engagement so that is very exciting.”

### Strategies analysed and nurtured

As part of EPIC, St Peters teacher Miriam Bryan was mentored by two of Australia's leading parent engagement experts – Dr Willis and Professor Beryl Exley – both

from Griffith University – who joined her for a series of initial planning workshops over two professional learning days, then guided her parent engagement practice in weekly meetings.

“I always thought of engaging parents as being around pastoral care and something you might do when dealing with behavioural issues,” Miriam said.

“But during those initial EPIC meetings when I heard about engaging parents in the curriculum, and how teachers can partner with parents and tap into their knowledge to improve outcomes for students, that was a real lightbulb moment for me.

“I thought ‘absolutely we can let parents know what is happening and do more to encourage those conversations between children and parents about what they are learning’.

“Some small tweaks in how we communicate with families means that instead of a parent asking ‘how was your day?’ and the children responding with ‘great’ or ‘boring’, the parent can ask

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Tim Kotzur

about the topic they know is being studied, leading to a more meaningful two-way conversation."

## Simple strategies, great returns

Miriam experimented with a range of strategies to bring parents closer to what she was teaching in the classroom, including sharing more detailed information on the existing teacher-parent portal, getting students to email their parents examples of their work and encouraging parent involvement in classroom projects.

"In our science unit I invited parents to get involved and help their child with an earth and space project and some of the projects we got back were incredible. One Dad and his son had produced

3D modelling of the universe with an accompanying poster and I don't think his son would have been as engaged in that unit of work had it not been for his Dad's interest."

Miriam also noticed a tangible shift in her relationship with her community of parents as a result of the project.

**"It feels to me they are so much happier and so much more connected to me," she said.**

"Engaging parents in this way is definitely something I will continue to do in my practice."

Miriam said her Year 5 teaching colleagues had been very interested in her EPIC work and were seeking to improve their own parent engagement practices as a result.

## Leading from the top

For St Peter's Head of College Tim Kotzur, those powerful results are exactly what he was hoping to reap from EPIC.

**"Parent Engagement at St Peter's is critically important, so much so that it is part of our strategic intent, where we are deliberate and intentional about making sure that each parent is deeply connected to their child's learning journey," Tim said.**

"Because we've been so involved in EPIC at this really intense, classroom level, one of the great benefits has been our teachers are starting to develop a pedagogy around parent engagement, which is something that we hadn't really thought about before.

**"It's involved a few little tweaks here and there, but they are so much more deliberate and intentional about their learning experiences and how they might engage their parents.**

"We've found the partnership between home and school has been strengthened as a result.

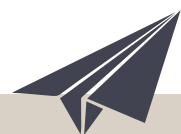
"EPIC has been a wonderful learning experience and professional development experience and I'd really like to thank ISQ, Griffith University and QIS Parents Network for their support and the funding they have given us."

## Momentum is building

Griffith University's Professor Beryl Exley, who worked closely with Miriam during the EPIC project, described the teaching veteran as a "shining light" in parent engagement and predicted that many future teachers will benefit from her work.

"Miriam was such a stellar appointment to EPIC, she brings so much willingness to learn and extend, and has this amazing capacity to take a kernel of an idea and let it flourish in her context.

"We can't wait to share the findings from her 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](http://www.isq.qld.edu.au) or [www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au](http://www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au)