

Redesigning Schooling

Engaging parents: Why and how



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Bill Lucas



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Chapter 1

A tale of two worlds



Positive parental engagement in learning improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity.

(Emerson et al. 2012)



When parents send their children to school, some breathe a sigh of relief as they entrust their offspring to professional educators. Others, often those who have spent much time and thought selecting their child's school in the first place, sense the start of a shifting of roles. From being their child's only teacher they wonder what it will be like to be part of a team, parents plus teacher, and how this new partnership will help their loved one get on in life.



When teachers receive children into their schools they are similarly conflicted. Some set about establishing precisely the kind of shared role just described. Others, quite a considerable number in my experience, secretly breathe their own sigh of relief when the parent has left the

premises and is out of the way. They can now get on with the job of educating the student in question.

The result of these actions is that, for a significant number of children, the two worlds of home and school only rarely overlap. At a few points of transition (recruitment, choosing courses and leaving), the worlds do collide. And periodically, as the year unfurls, meetings take place to track progress – for example when school reports are issued. Even today it is possible that, as a parent, you will find yourself sitting on a child-sized chair, while the teacher talks to you from a higher position on an adult-sized seat. And if a child is misbehaving or dramatically underachieving, there will inevitably be a summons to come and discuss things.

Joyce Epstein puts this eloquently:

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as *students*, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as *children*, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners in children's education and development (Epstein 2009).

It need not be a tale of two separate worlds. It is perfectly possible to develop a real partnership between school, child, parent and family – but this requires many meaningful interactions between home and school. A growing number of schools genuinely see those acting in the position of parents as partners and are adapting their practices accordingly.

The evidence for the benefits of a different, deeper, two-way engagement of parents in their children's schooling is strong. Parents (and in some cases guardians, carers or other family members) are a major influence on a child's success in life. While the quality of schools and the nature of the child's peer group matter significantly, it is from the home that young people derive lasting effects on their character, mindset and attainment. Parents are, after all, a child's first teacher well before the formal world of education is encountered. And while estimates vary, somewhere between 75% and 85% of a child's waking hours are spent outside the school classroom.

In 2012, the authors of a report on parental engagement commissioned by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth concluded that "resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to, education reform and the future of Australia" (Emerson et al. 2012). This booklet continues that work by championing the wholesale adoption of a strategy of parent and family and community engagement. It also makes the case for far higher levels of awareness among school leaders, teachers, parents and other community members about the kinds of parental engagement that really work – both to raise achievement *and* to develop learners who will thrive in the 21st century. Such activities need to be integral to school strategy, genuinely seen as important by all teachers and regularly evaluated for their effectiveness.