

Parent engagement in schools project – Research brief for DET

Background:

Research shows parent engagement, encompassing parents' behaviours, attitudes and activities related to their children's education, has been shown to foster positive learning outcomes of children. The school climate and leadership have strong influences on parent engagement, therefore an understanding of these school factors and how schools interact with parents and the wider community is vital in working towards encouraging parent engagement and ensuring equal learning opportunities for all Australian children.

Aim:

To gather information on school climate and leadership around parent engagement in schools to identify best practice and challenges experienced by schools and families in working together to improve learner outcomes.

Methods:

All state schools in Queensland (n=1,233) in 2014 were included in the sample, with a total of 729 schools participating (492 P&C Presidents and 457 Principals).

Surveys were primarily delivered online although some were completed using hard copy (16 P&C Presidents and 3 Principals).

P&C Survey Results

Information about the P&C

The average P&C meeting had 10 attendees, occurred monthly (94%) during the week between 5-7pm (37%) and lasted 1-2 hours (77%). Meetings were characterized by respect, openness, collaboration and compromise.



Most P&C presidents were members of the executive team first, although only 60% reported a handover process. Presidents were more likely to rate the initial skills of their executive as sufficient when a handover occurred (75% vs 63%).

Communication

A small proportion of Presidents reported daily communication with executive members (16%), although it was most common to engage with executive members and the Principal on a weekly basis. It was much less common for P&C Presidents to be in frequent contact with local businesses and members of parliament. Communication methods used by the P&C Association were diverse, with school newsletters, paper notices, emails, social media and websites being the most commonly used methods.

Fundraising

The most important aspects of school life that the P&C contributed to were fundraising, running various school shops, and the uniform policy.

Half of the P&Cs raised under \$20,000 in 2013, although 12% raised over \$50,000. The majority of funds raised were donated to the school.

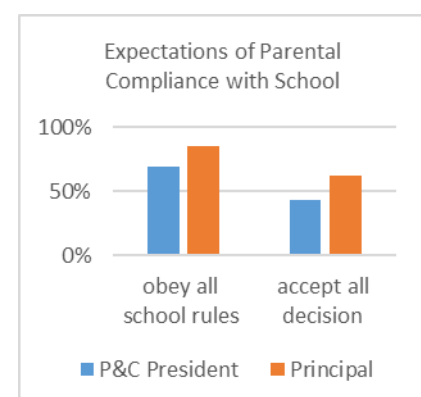
Combined Survey Results

Connections between schools, parent and communities

Almost all Principals agreed they had strong relationships with parents; this sentiment was echoed by approximately three quarters of P&C Presidents. Similarly, 94% of Principals agreed they played an integral role in promoting parent engagement and 76% of Presidents agreed with this statement in regards to their Principal. For both groups, the vast majority agreed that parents were given opportunities to voice issues and concerns.

Both Principals and Presidents ranked the Principal, P&C Executive and P&C President as the most important people for promoting P&C events. As reported by P&C Presidents, 45% of the schools were viewed as hub for the community, and of these the school grounds were most commonly used for sports (39%) and community meetings (27%).

There were significant differences found between the P&C Presidents' and the Principals' expectations of parent compliance with school rules and decisions. With 85% of Principals (as compared to 69% of P&C Presidents) agreeing parents should obey school rules even when it goes against what they think is right and 62% of Principals (as compared to 43% of P&C Presidents) agreeing that parents should accept decisions made by the school.



Parent engagement

Benefits: Parent engagement was believed by both Presidents and Principals to enhance student behavior, school culture, student attendance, student learning outcomes, social capital, retention of students and self-development among parents.

Expectations: Principals believe parents should be involved in the following areas:

- *School operations:* The P&C (94%) and uniform policy (90%).
- *Student learning:* Supporting their children's learning at home (97%) and parent teacher interviews (97%).
- *School resources/finances:* Volunteering (89%) and fundraising (87%).
- *School events/socials:* school events (86%) and parents and children together activities (86%).

Alternatively, only 18% of Principals agreed that parents **aren't** well equipped to be active participants in school governance (compared to 9% of P&C Presidents who agreed their Principals thought this). Only 2% of Principals agree parent engagement is an unnecessary interference (compared to 8% of P&C Presidents who agreed their Principal thought this).

Parent engagement

Level of engagement: Almost a third of P&C Presidents stated it was difficult to get volunteers, while around 40% maintained a list of parents willing to help and used small group networking to get volunteers. Some P&C Presidents stated they found one-on-one contact was effective in engaging parents, but in general the level of parental engagement has been declining according to some Presidents, as illustrated by the following quote: "It appears to be getting harder every year to find parents to volunteer their time to assist the P&C." This difficulty in engaging parents was also echoed by the Principals.

Effective engagement: Both P&C Presidents and Principals agreed that creating a respectful and welcoming environment was most effective in engaging parents.

P&C Presidents also agreed that using multiple communication methods and hosting events were most effective. Principals agreed that recognizing your volunteers and making oneself available and visible were most effective for engaging parents.

Barriers to Parent Engagement

While both P&C Presidents and Principals reported that work and family commitments were barriers to parent engagement, P&C Presidents also identified a lack of parent interest and Principals identified that the timing of events were additional barriers to parents engaging with schools.

Primary schools were more likely to agree that family commitments were a barrier (67% of Presidents; 84% of Principals) than secondary schools (56% of Presidents; 70% of Principals).

For Principals, timing of events was more likely to be a barrier in rural schools (61%) than provincial city/remote schools or metropolitan schools (50% and 53% respectively).

For Presidents, work commitments were seen as more of a barrier in metropolitan (90%) than provincial city/remote (77%) and rural schools (84%), as were family commitments (65% of metropolitan school P&C Presidents agreed this was a barrier compared to 46% of provincial city/remote and 59% of rural schools)

Principal Survey Results

Communication

The majority of principals communicated with parents via both electronic and paper newsletters;

- 47% of principals sent newsletters fortnightly, 32% sent weekly.
- Text messages were the least used method of communication (52% never use).
- Urban schools (57%) and high schools (80%) were more likely to use texts than non-urban schools (40%) or primary schools (41%).
- Emails were also less commonly used – 20% of Principals **never** use emails to communicate with parents.
- Urban schools (86%) and high schools (92%) were more likely to use email than non-urban schools (75%) and primary schools (78%).
- Social media was also highlighted as another form of communication.
- The majority of Principals (63%) stated the school had daily phone calls with individual parents.

The most common ways of finding out what parents wanted/needed were P&C meetings, word of mouth and meetings with individual parents; these were also ranked as the most important ways to discover this information.

The P&C Association – Involvement and Feedback

Principals believed in the importance of the P&C, its feedback role and role in fundraising, although only about half of Principals agreed the P&C was the driver for community and parent engagement. Principals considered the P&C Association highly relevant to Queensland schools.

Most often at P&C meetings, Principals reported on school activities and budget, participated in decision making and ensured the P&C met their responsibilities. Overall, Principals evaluated their P&C Associations positively.

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The views expressed in the summary are those of the author and are not the views of the Department Education and Training.