

Parent engagement and family-school partnerships—what does the research tell us?

There is strong evidence that parent engagement is associated with significant improvements in academic achievement for students of all ages. Robust research also links parent engagement to the improvement of other outcomes including early literacy acquisition, school readiness, attendance, motivation, self-regulatory behaviour, social skills, retention and graduation.

Although parent engagement is strongly associated with academic achievement and other outcomes, this does not necessarily mean it directly causes them. A range of factors influence student outcomes. Parent engagement is one. Student health, school leadership and classroom instruction are others.

Importantly, the research highlights that home-based parent engagement generally plays a greater role in student achievement than school-based parent involvement. However school-based involvement can contribute, for example, by reducing behaviour issues in children and creating favourable teacher perceptions which then influence teacher-child interactions.

Desforges' (2003) review of evidence on what parents do naturally (spontaneous support) and what others do to support parent efforts (interventions) revealed that 'at-home good parenting' was strongly associated with student achievement. The identified elements, including an intellectually stimulating environment, parent-child discussions, the encouragement of high aspirations and constructive modelling of educational values, are recognised today as key indicators of positive parent engagement.

Other reputable studies have demonstrated that well designed interventions as well as family-led engagement can effectively contribute to education outcomes, including for students from low income families and minority groups (e.g. Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2012).

There is consistent evidence that parents' encouragement, activities, interest at home, and participation at school affect their children's achievement, even after students' ability and family socio-economic status are taken into account. (Australian Parents Council, 2009, p. 13).

Interest in parent/family engagement is growing due to education policies and frameworks that now link it to student and school performance and its potential to help close achievement gaps.

While engagement has a broader focus than family-school partnerships, these continue to be viewed as key levers for creating school cultures that embody the ideals of mutual support and sharing of responsibility. Partnerships need to evolve to better accommodate changing family structures, student agency and 21st century learning.

The evidence suggests that parental engagement strategies have the greatest impact when they are focused on linking behaviours of families, teachers and students to learning outcomes, when there is a clear understanding of the roles of parents and teachers in learning, when family behaviours are conducive to learning, and when there are consistent, positive relations between the school and parents. (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012, p. 32).

There is currently less empirical evidence on the effects of family-school partnerships than there is on parent engagement, although their necessity is broadly accepted. Cox's (2005) review on 'home-school collaboration' interventions is noteworthy, illuminating two-way information exchange and the equal treatment of partners as critical features of effective partnerships. More recent research has demonstrated the capacity of partnerships to reduce the potential impact of various forms of risk among vulnerable students (e.g. Stormshack, Dishion & Falkenstein, 2010; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010).

School principals, teachers, administrators and others who work with parents must embrace the role of boundary spanner, learning how to build relationships that hover at the peripheries between home, school and community (Price-Mitchell, 2009, p. 21).

Progressive themes in the literature highlight that partnerships are engaged relationships with a focus on the quality of interactions, that their purpose is to create new knowledge from the separate and overlapping systems of home and school, that a shift is needed from considerations of 'why' to 'how to', and also that it is time to move from programmatic to systemic interventions.

Effective parent engagement has a positive influence on:

- ✓ Early literacy acquisition
- ✓ School readiness
- ✓ School adjustment
- ✓ Cognitive development
- ✓ Motivation
- ✓ Attendance
- ✓ Belief in the importance of education
- ✓ Engagement in school work
- ✓ Social and relationship skills
- ✓ Self-regulation behaviour
- ✓ Sense of personal competence
- ✓ Wellbeing
- ✓ Enrolment in higher level classes
- ✓ Academic achievement
- ✓ Retention
- ✓ Graduation
- ✓ Participation in post-secondary education

Supporting and facilitating parent and family engagement to help raise student performance and close achievement gaps is vitally important, but engagement deserves attention and effort for many other reasons.

When schools collaboratively plan and implement parent and family engagement as an intentional strategy, they benefit from and contribute to family knowledge, experiences, capacities and networks. Collectively, this enriches lifelong learning and strengthens communities.

Further information

For more information about parent engagement and partnerships, a range of [resources and links](#) is available.

A new series of Australian [case studies](#) that illustrate different approaches to engaging with parents and the broader community is also available.