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WHY IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT IN EDUCATION?

The Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, *Through Growth to Achievement*, recognised the critical importance of family engagement in education:

“The more parents and carers engage in learning, the greater the chance that their children are engaged, motivated and confident learners.”

There is a substantial body of research which demonstrates that when families are engaged in the education of their children and young people:

- Achievement outcomes for learners improve
- Learner attendance improves
- Learner engagement improves
- Learner retention improves
- School completion rates increase
- Behavioural issues decrease
- Learner wellbeing improves.

Recognising the central role of families in learning is part of ‘telling the full story’ when developing policy and making decisions in an education system. Engaging the knowledge, experiences and ideas of families directly in the policy and decision-making process can help inform the frameworks that underpin learning for every child and student at schools and Child and Family Centres (CFCs).

“Parents are leaders and experts in their child’s learning.”

TASMANIAN COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICES SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW TO ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

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2. Ibid.
PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

Recognising the critical importance of family engagement in education, this Family Engagement Review (the Review) seeks to understand the current state of family engagement in the Tasmanian Department of Education (the Department).

In particular, it seeks to understand how families are currently engaged in policy development and decision making at the Department, school and CFC level and to provide recommendations for strengthening this engagement, to support improved learning outcomes.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

Within this Review ‘family’ is an inclusive term referring to all parents, carers, and guardians of learners.

‘Engagement’ is a term that encompasses a wide range of practices on a continuum from:

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<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding a problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public through a process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are constantly understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of decision making or process including the development of alternatives and the identification of a preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</td>
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Family engagement can be defined as families and the Department, including schools and CFCs, working together, with the shared goal of achieving positive outcomes for learners.

The scope of this Review is limited to consideration of how families are engaged:

- At the Department level in decision making and policy development
- At the school and CFC level in decision making in relation to the life of the school and CFC, and the individual child’s learning.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Collaboratively develop a framework which sets out clear expectations, and provides coherent guidance on engaging with families at the Department, school and CFC levels.

2. Expand and strengthen supports to build the capacity of families to engage with their child’s education at a Department, school and CFC level.

3. Specifically embed family engagement as a critical element in the Department’s strategies and practices for school improvement.

“Use family and community engagement as a key strategy for school improvement and cultural change.”

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING: KEY DIMENSIONS – FAMILY SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK 4

RECOMMENDATIONS IN DETAIL

1. Collaboratively develop a framework which sets out clear expectations, and provides coherent guidance on engaging with families at the Department, school and Child and Family Centre (CFC) levels

Our current practices

Department

The Department engages with families in the development of policy and to inform decision making in a variety of ways. In particular through discrete consultation, where feedback is sought on specific issues or initiatives.

The Department has established capability and practices for informing families, including communicating key information, policy changes or action required. This includes the Department’s social media platforms and more targeted communication campaigns – aiming to raise the profile of public education, for example.

Direct consultation with families is not a common approach in Departmental policy development. Instead, consultation is often undertaken with peak bodies, such as the Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations, or through third parties which conduct consultation on behalf of the Department. Direct consultation with families, as part of the community, is a significant component of the Get Involved program supporting school and early learning capital works projects.

Sustained collaboration with families to develop strategic policy, or provide ongoing advice is also uncommon at a Departmental level. However there are emerging pockets of practice which provide a foundation on which to build. In particular, policy and decision making within the sphere of ‘diversity and inclusion’ such as the implementation of the Disability Action Plan 2018-2021, and the ‘early years’ through the Working Together for Three Year Olds initiative.

Policy makers consulted as part of this Review expressed genuine belief in the importance of engaging families, through consultation and collaboration. However, they suggested their approach to family engagement is constrained by lack of consistent understanding of what is meant by family engagement, lack of clarity around Departmental expectations for family engagement, and need for skills in high-quality family engagement practice.

Policy makers also queried the representativeness of current family engagement practices at a Departmental level, suggesting that specific consideration and skill needs to be built in reaching families who face barriers to engagement.

Schools and Child and Family Centres (CFCs)

Schools and CFCs have particular strengths when it comes to involving families in the life of the school or centre, through:

- Community gardens and kitchens
- Welcoming environments
- School and community events
- School Associations.
Engagement of families specifically in learning at school is an area of growth. At present, families are engaged in learning through programs, or for specific cohorts of students. For example:

- Assessment and reporting processes
- Co-creation of learning plans with families and schools to support learners with additional educational needs
- Launching into Learning (LiL) and Learning in Families Together (LIFT).

School and CFC staff recognised current opportunities to build capacity for family engagement, in particular professional learning in the ‘Family Partnerships Model.’

They also expressed a need for continued capacity building to improve and deepen engagement of all families in learning, moving from a consultative to collaborative approach. In particular, to build positive respectful relationships around learning progress, consisting of trust, active listening, non-judgmental approaches, and equal power relations. They also expressed a need for clear expectations in relation to family engagement, and flexible guidance and support to embed family engagement in learning, and the wider life of the school.

**Best practice from research**

A number of Australian jurisdictions have developed frameworks for family engagement which clearly define what it is within their context, outline expectations for practice, and provide guidance and resources to enable high quality engagement with families across all levels of education; Department and school.

Research demonstrates the value of frameworks to support family engagement. Frameworks provide a way of bringing together complex concepts into one accessible tool, and clarity that helps to embed practice. For frameworks to be effective, they have to balance the need for clear definitions and explicit expectations with flexibility to enable the context of particular policy development, project, or school to be taken into consideration.

**Recommendations for improving practice**

In collaboration with key stakeholders, develop a Family Engagement Framework for the Department that includes:

- A definition of family engagement that is owned and understood by all stakeholders.
- A unified and agreed understanding of the impacts of family engagement on quality policy development, decision making, and practice at both Departmental and school levels.
- Setting universal family engagement expectations whilst empowering stakeholders to determine their own practices appropriate to their context.
2. Expand and strengthen supports to build the capacity of families to engage with their child’s education at a Department, school and Child and Family Centre (CFC) level

Our current practices

The Department does not, at this point in time, provide a central source of information, resources, and supports for families to understand how they can be engaged in their child’s education at a range of levels, and equip them to do so.

The delivery of the ‘Family Partnerships Model’ training in the areas of the ‘early years’ and ‘diversity and inclusion’ was consistently mentioned in the course of the Review as a key enabler not only for staff, but also families. Information about involvement in School Associations is also readily available for families at a school level.

Throughout the Review, it was reported that even where policy makers and school and CFC staff implement innovative approaches to engage families through consultation and collaboration, take up can be low. Families are not always clear on their critically important role in education, what they can contribute, and that their engagement is valued by system leaders, school leaders and teachers.
In addition, throughout the Review it was recognised that there are families who experience barriers to engagement and may need extra support. These families are unlikely to participate in traditional consultations for policy development, and may not be active on School Associations. Examples included:

- Families who had previous negative experiences with government agencies, services and schools
- Families experiencing disadvantage, such as poverty, trauma, family violence and mental health issues
- The increase in dual working families and reduction in the availability of time due to work commitments
- Low literacy levels
- The age of the learner (as learners become older they tend to become more independent and less likely to seek the physical presence of families in school).

There was a range of ideas suggested for building the capacity of families to engage, with one in four stakeholders consulted as part of the Review recommending directly seeking the views of a diversity of families on how they would like to be engaged. Other suggestions included using technology, allocating specific human resources for family engagement at a Department and school level to build capacity of families, and developing specific tools for harder to reach families.

**Best practice from research**

National policy supports building the capacity of families to engage in education at a range of levels. *Through Growth to Achievement* recommends the development of evidence based tools and resources to empower families to engage in education on a range of levels, and in a range of ways. This might include changing the way the education system and schools interact with families about learning progress, student assessment and reporting.

A number of jurisdictions have developed websites and online portals that provide information, resources and support to families to enable engagement that spans a range of intensities. In addition, other jurisdictions have developed resources to support specific family cohorts who may be more difficult to reach. For example; the Department of Education and Training Queensland are currently undertaking research with the University of Queensland into parent engagement in disadvantaged schools, and South Australia provides resources for families differentiated by the age of learners.

**Recommendations for improving practice**

- In collaboration with key stakeholders develop a portal of information, resources and supports for families that articulates the critical role of families in education, how families can be engaged in a variety of ways across the Department, schools and CFCs.
- Build the capacity of families to engage in education through the development of supports and training.
- Develop and promote evidence-based practices to reach family cohorts that require further support and empowerment to engage in education at both Department and school levels.
- In collaboration with families, reconsider assessment and reporting ensuring they support strong family engagement in learning.
3. Specifically embed family engagement as a critical element in the Department’s strategies and practices for school improvement

Our current practices

The Department has recently embarked on a program of external school review, as a key lever in its school improvement agenda, utilising the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) as the review framework. Domain nine of the NSIT, ‘School Community Partnerships’, seeks to understand the level and quality of family engagement in education, at a school level.

Through external school review, individual schools may be provided with information on how family engagement positively impacts on student learning in their school, and how family engagement might be improved against the standards set out in the NSIT. School Satisfaction Surveys may be evidence which informs the review. Questions that may be asked as part of external school review, include:

- How well does the school consult with families and respond to their views and aspirations?
- How effective is the family/school partnership?
- How effectively does the school report learning achievement and progress to families?

Through annual cycles of external school review, trends in family engagement across the system may also be reported, enabling strategies, resources and tools to be developed and customised to the Tasmanian context to support different intensities of engagement.

At present, school improvement planning does not include a specific focus on family engagement. As such, the planning stage for school improvement does not explicitly facilitate the embedding of family engagement in learning at a school level, despite the extensive research that substantiates the critical role of families in learning.

Over the course of this Review, policy makers and school staff did not immediately connect strengthening family engagement with the Department’s improvement agenda. This may be because the Department’s school improvement agenda is heavily focussed on teaching and learning, and the connection between improving student learning (as opposed to attendance, or wellbeing) and more intensive forms of family engagement, such as collaboration, is not always acknowledged.

**Best practice from research**

Family engagement is embedded in other jurisdiction’s school improvement processes. Of particular note, family engagement is a key component of school improvement frameworks in jurisdictions that have seen significant improvement in student learning outcomes including the Department of Education and Training Victoria’s ‘Framework for Improving Student Outcomes’, and the Department of Education and Training Queensland’s ‘School Improvement Hierarchy.’

**Recommendations for improving practice**

- Strengthen family engagement as a critical element in the Department’s strategies and practices for school improvement; in particular, as part of policy and documentation that support school improvement planning.
- Review the design and use of the School Satisfaction Survey to ensure that it provides valuable information on family engagement to inform improvement at all levels of the Department.
- Strengthen methods to measure and evaluate the quality and impact of family engagement on school improvement, in particular through external school review.
BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

On 21 June 2018 the Minister for Education and Training requested that the Secretary of the Department of Education undertake a review of family engagement.

This enacted a commitment by the Premier to the Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations that, if re-elected, the Government would undertake a review of how the Department of Education engages families in decision making.

The Review was informed by consultation with a range of internal and external stakeholders, and a desktop review into national and international best practice.

Internal stakeholders who provided input to the Review included:

- A sample of 24 schools, including Primary Schools, District Schools, High Schools and Colleges
- 3 Child and Family Centres
- 3 Early Childhood Interventions Services Centres
- 3 School Associations
- 4 DoE policy units including
  - Strategic Policy and Planning
  - Strategic System Improvement
  - Child and Student Wellbeing
  - Early Years Partnerships and Projects.
- 8 other DoE Business Units and project teams, including:
  - Aboriginal Education Services
  - Strategic Marketing, Communications and Media
  - Inclusion and Diversity Services
  - Government Education and Training International
  - Education Performance and Review
  - Professional Learning Institute
  - Family Partnership Model Facilitator
  - Vocational Learning and Career Education.

External stakeholders who provided input to the Review included:

- Australia Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)
- Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Peter Underwood Centre, University of Tasmania
- Tasmanian Council of Social Services (TasCoSS)
- Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO)
- Tasmanian Principals Association (TPA).

A complete list of stakeholders consulted as part of this Review is provided as an attachment to this report.
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Family Partnership Model

What is it?
The Family Partnership Model (FPM) is an evidence-based and internationally recognised approach to partnership that has been recognised as a key enabler of engagement where it has been used within DoE, particularly in Child and Family Centres.

FPM training aims to support the building of genuine and respectful partnerships that improve outcomes for children and their families.

Reported positive impacts:
- Creates positive respectful relationships.
- Builds confidence, capability and skills.

Child and Family Centres

What happens?
Child and Family Centres (CFCs) are for children from birth to five years of age and their families. They are places where families and children can go to play, learn and grow together. CFCs also provide access to support, and health and wellbeing services.

CFCs give families the support they need to be the best parent/carer they can be. There are 12 CFCs around Tasmania. Six additional Child and Family Learning Centres will be built over the next five years, which build on the CFC model and will also provide access to early learning (child care) services.

Reported positive impacts:
- Increases in learning and development outcomes for children.
- Supports children’s learning before they begin school.
- Encourages fun through learning.
- Creates connections to universal and community supports.
- Creates connections to other families and builds a sense of community.

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Launching into Learning

What happens?
Launching into Learning (LiL) is a free program for young children (birth – four years old) and their families. It operates in all Tasmanian Government primary and district schools. LiL programs support children with their development in an atmosphere of fun and learning and also support positive transitions into Kindergarten. Families are acknowledged, supported and respected in the essential role they play in their child’s development. Schools work in partnership with families, focussing on the needs in their community and making connections with other groups, services and agencies in the area.

Reported positive impacts:
• Builds positive, respectful partnerships between families and school.
• Increases learning and developmental outcomes for children.
• Supports families to talk, read and play with their child every day.
• Supports positive transitions into Kindergarten.
• Links families with other forms of support.

Learning in Families Together

What happens?
Learning in Families Together (LIFT) builds confidence and skills in families in order to support their children’s literacy and numeracy learning at home. It encourages collaboration between home, school and the community to help lift learning outcomes for learners. It is for families in selected schools with children in Kindergarten to Year 2 at no cost to the family.

Reported positive impacts:
• Increases in learning and development outcomes for children, including in literacy and numeracy.
• Increases family engagement in learning.
• Builds positive respectful relationships between schools and families.
• Enables staff to better understand how to engage families in learning.
• Enables families to engage with their own learning.
Meet the teacher information sessions

What happens?

Some schools hold ‘meet the teacher information sessions’ at the start of Term 1. This involves parents visiting the new classroom to meet the new teacher(s). The sessions provide teachers and families with an opportunity to explain class routines, see the class environment, ask questions and discuss learning outcomes for the year ahead.

These sessions are tailored to the school context. For example, at one school, where many parents have English as an additional language, interpreters are made available to facilitate communication. At another school, booklets asking questions about the learner, were given to families for them to complete and return to the teacher. The booklets provided an opportunity for the families to record information on the learner's goals and their individual likes and dislikes.

Reported positive impacts:

• Families feel more informed about school procedures, practices and expectations.
• Provides an opportunity for teachers to hear from families, including their aspirations for their child and address immediate concerns or questions.
• Provides families with an opportunity to share knowledge about their child.
• Enables the teacher to understand more about the learner.
• Improves ongoing communication between families and schools.
• Creates relationships of understanding between families and schools.
• Provides first steps to establishing trust.
• Provides an opportunity for further family engagement across the school year.
• Recognises the important role of families in the child's education.
• Encourages positive attitudes towards learning and education.

Three positive telephone calls

What happens?

Some schools have implemented a process of making ‘three positive telephone calls’ to parents. The teacher calls the parents early in Term 1 and, across a set time frame, makes a total of three telephone calls.

The purpose of the telephone call is to foster positive relationships with families, share positive stories about the learner, find out more about the interests of the learner and their family context, and provide an opportunity for the family to ask questions.

Reported positive impacts:

• Creates positive respectful relationships and trust.
• Builds confidence of families and staff.
• Creates collaboration and a positive school culture.
• Increases understanding and awareness of learner needs.
• Families appreciate the opportunity to talk to the teacher and look forward to the calls.
• Increases family engagement at home and school.
School assemblies

What happens?

School assemblies are events that provide opportunities to recognise learner achievements and celebrate learner success. Schools recognise how valuable it is to engage families in these celebrations.

Families are invited to attend school assemblies, with schools recognising that not all family members can regularly attend assemblies. To help families make the most of these events and specific acknowledgements, schools contact families when they know that a learner will be recognised and take photos or videos of the learner to send to families.

Reported positive impacts:

- Demonstrates respect for families and learners.
- Creates a sense of community and connection with the school.
- Creates positive respectful relationships.
- Recognises the achievement of learners.
- Fosters the value of education.

Community gardens and kitchens

What happens?

Some schools establish community gardens on school grounds, to grow a range of fruit and vegetables. Sometimes this leads to establishing community kitchens to turn garden produce into healthy and nutritional meals.

Gardens and kitchens provide schools with practical learning opportunities that align to the curriculum. They also provide opportunities for learners to develop life skills such as communication, organising and planning.

Gardens and kitchens enable wider community engagement with local businesses, such as TasTAFE, Libraries Tasmania, local government and not-for-profit organisations. Groups work together to connect the school to other community opportunities and this builds further opportunities for learning.

Families engage with community gardens and kitchens through volunteer work, and sharing their knowledge and skills to support the learners. Families, learners and staff work together for the benefit of the school community.

Reported positive impacts:

- Creates shared learning experiences for learners, families and staff.
- Builds relationships and partnerships between home and school.
- Increases family engagement in school and home.
- Develops a sense of community and contributes to positive school culture.
- Increases adult engagement in their own learning, as some families access adult education courses as a result of volunteering.
Harmony Day celebration

What happens?

Some schools celebrate Harmony Day, using it as a chance to teach understanding and respect amongst diverse cultures. Harmony Day is also an opportunity to recognise the specific cultures of their learners and their families within the school community.

During Harmony Day events, children and their families celebrate cultures by wearing traditional costumes/clothes, bringing music, demonstrating dances or customs and sharing food from their country of origin.

Reported positive impacts:

- Learners experience and celebrate each other’s cultures.
- Strengthens a sense of community.
- Builds respect and creates empathy.
- Facilitates learning within the curriculum.
- Families, staff and learners have fun together.
- Recognises the important role of families in the child’s education.
- Promotes shared understanding.

Recognising families

What happens?

Some schools organise events to celebrate family members, such as breakfast events for Father’s Day, morning teas for Mother’s Day and afternoon tea for grandparents or other significant carers. These type of events are social in nature, but provide an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the important role of families. During these events, learners might show families their work or their classroom environment, and staff meet and greet family members in a relaxed environment. Schools note that gathering to enjoy food together is a successful way to encourage participation.

Reported positive impacts:

- Builds positive respectful relationships.
- Acknowledges the important role of families.
- Enables learners to show their work to families.
- Provides an informal opportunity for families to visit schools.
- Promotes a positive school environment.
Numeracy games

What happens?

In some schools numeracy workshops are held for families. These provide information on the curriculum and intended learning outcomes during the Term. After the workshop and on a weekly basis, numeracy games are sent home with the learners.

Reported positive impacts:

• Increases learner outcomes and engagement in numeracy at school and home.
• Increases family engagement with numeracy at home.
• Encourages learning through fun for the whole family.

School Associations

What happens?

School Associations consist of parents, staff and community members of the school. Each year School Associations nominate members of the Association to the School Association Committee. The Committee performs administrative activities on behalf of the Association and works together to support the school.

One way that the School Association Committee supports the school is through consultative decision making, where the Committee provides their knowledge and gives advice on school policies.

Reported positive impacts:

• Creates a shared understanding and accountability for school policies.
• Improves communication across the School Association on those policies.
• Improves relationships between families and the school.
• Creates a collaborative and positive learning culture.
• Families share knowledge and skills for the benefit of the wider school community.
• Models good citizenship.
• Fosters the value and benefit of education.
## ATTACHMENT 2: LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

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<td>Early Childhood Intervention Services Centres (ECIS)</td>
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<td>Child and Family Centres (CFC)</td>
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|                                        | • Rosny College Association  
|                                        | • Montrose Bay High School Association                                               |
| Other Government Agencies              | • Department of Health and Human Services – Human Centred Design                   |
| Internal DoE Units and Project Teams   | • Aboriginal Education Services  
|                                        | • Child and Student Wellbeing  
|                                        | • Early Years Partnerships and Projects  
|                                        | • Education Performance and Review (EPR)  
|                                        | • English as an Additional Language (EAL) Team  
|                                        | • Family Partnership Model Facilitator  
|                                        | • Government Education and Training International (GETI)  
|                                        | • Inclusion and Diversity Services  
|                                        | • Professional Learning Institute (PLI)  
|                                        | • Strategic Marketing, Communications and Media  
|                                        | • Strategic Policy and Planning  
|                                        | • Strategic System Improvement  
|                                        | • Vocational Learning and Career Education                                               |
| External Stakeholders                  | • Australia Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)  
|                                        | • Commissioner for Children and Young People  
|                                        | • Peter Underwood Centre, University of Tasmania  
|                                        | • Tasmanian Council of Social Services (TasCoSS)  
|                                        | • Tasmanian Council of Social Services (TasCoSS)  
|                                        | • Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO)  
|                                        | • Tasmanian Principals Association (TPA)  

ATTACHMENT 3: USEFUL RESOURCES

Other Australian Jurisdictions:


Australian Government:

- Family-school partnerships: https://www.education.gov.au/family-school-partnerships-1
- Learning potential resources: https://www.learningpotential.edu.au/
- New South Wales Government, Opening the school gate resource for migrant and refugee families: https://schoolsequella.det.nsw.edu.au/file/e439885d-a9f4-41d4-a460-3a0b317cb1c1/Opening-the-school-gate.pdf

Tasmania:

• Tasmania Principals Association (TPA): http://www.tpa.org.au/
• Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO): https://www.tasso.org.au/
• Tasmanian Community Sector Industry (TasCOSS): https://www.tascoss.org.au/
• University of Tasmania, Parent engagement webpage: http://www.utas.edu.au/parent-engagement

Other National resources:

• Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), parents portal: http://www.parentsaustralia.com/
• Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative, Kidsmatter: https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/about-partnerships/about-working-together/building-partnerships-between-families-and
• Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leaderships Standards, website: https://www.aitsl.edu.au/
• Early Childhood Intervention Australia, National Guidelines for Best Practice: https://www.ecia.org.au/Resources/National-Guidelines-for-Best-Practice-in-ECI
• Monash University, Subject- Building partnerships with families and communities: http://www.monash.edu/pubs/2018handbooks/units/EDF5659.html
• Parents Victoria: http://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au/
• Partners4 Learning, a framework to support partnership in Catholic school communities: http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/
• University of Queensland, Parent engagement in schools research: https://issr.uq.edu.au/parent-engagement-schools
International resources:

- Council of Ontario Directors of Education, Parent engagement:
  http://www.parentengagementmatters.ca/home
- Global Family Research Program: https://globalfrp.org/
- John Hopkins University, National network of partnership schools: http://nnps.jhucsos.com/
- Scottish Government, Parenzone: https://education.gov.scot/parentzone
- United Kingdom, Parentkind: https://www.parentkind.org.uk/
- Working together: school, family & community partnerships, toolkit for New Mexico school communities: http://www.cesdp.nmhu.edu/toolkit/improving-communication/index