

PARENT ENGAGEMENT (*January 2015*)



What is the best way for parents to approach/get involved with their local school?

The best way for parents to become involved at the school and engaged in their child's learning is via their parent club if the school has one. If the school does not have a parent club, then parents should come together to get one started. Parents Victoria can help school communities to do this. The parent club is the platform through which parents can have a direct, combined voice to the school.

Where possible, parents should be provided opportunities to participate. Traditionally schools have always invited family members to be classroom helpers; assist as canteen, sport, excursion and camp volunteers and to coordinate/participate at the school fete or any fundraising activity. In more recent times schools have to compete with other demands on families, their availability and good will. So school communities need to work smarter and harder on building relationships and communicating effectively with families to attract them and sustain their interest for the whole time their children attend the school. More schools today have kitchen gardens and parents can be great helpers/assistants in this area.

The DEECD website says about Parent Clubs:

"Parents and school staff are partners in children's education. By interacting with the school and other parents, parent club members gain a first hand understanding of how schools operate and the rhythm of school life. Parents participating in a school's parent club can use, and build on, their skills and confidence, develop friendships and work collaboratively with other parents interested in supporting the school."

What administration and legalities are there to consider?

On an individual level, all parent helpers in schools must present a Working With Children Check to the school office before commencing any work with students. There is no charge for a voluntary WWCC.

In terms of a Parent Club, there are DEECD guidelines to follow - for both the school and parents. Parents Victoria is available to assist both schools and parents to negotiate these legalities. Details can be found on the DEECD website:

www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/parentclub.aspx

What are some good ways for schools to engage with and encourage participation from parents?

Schools need to create a welcoming environment for starters. Having family friendly front office staff is imperative. An approachable management team and staff who are willing to work with, involve, and consult with their parent community will reap the benefits of a positive parent-school partnership. Schools need to learn the skills of their parent community. Many parents have a lot of skills in many and diverse areas, but if not asked, some will not be forthcoming. Schools seeking out this information show they value parents. School newsletters should encourage involvement, feedback, and input. Schools should acknowledge and seek participation of families. The benefits need to be visible and spoken about often. Most importantly, schools need to support their parent club or actively encourage the establishment of a club if one doesn't exist!

It is assumed families know how schools operate and their expectations. Preschool parents often have to rely on primary school parent networks to educate them on the protocols, policies and practices. Parents Victoria recommends ALL schools should consider how they induct families. Not just to the school facilities but to how the school operates, roles and responsibilities and most

importantly the “go to” person or place if a parent has a question. How they can best communicate with families now and in the future could include via sms, email, Viber or Facebook, with agreed privacy, policies and protocols. It is not an easy task for schools to coordinate, manage and monitor this to keep their families engaged or even to ensure their contact details are up to date.

We need to develop a culture in schools where parent participation is commonplace, not an exception.

Why is it important for schools to have parent volunteers?

Parents Victoria strongly believes it is more important to have parent engagement and participation than to concentrate on parent volunteers. If parents are engaged in their child's learning then they are more likely to become hands-on volunteers. Engagement first, volunteering second.

Time and again research confirms parental engagement/involvement is important to improving student outcomes. Parental engagement has many benefits not just for the students but the school staff and families.

Current active parents could be asked to be ambassadors to promote parent participation to new school families.

Does PV place more importance on parental engagement with a child's learning in the context of the home, or their participation at the child's school?

Parents Victoria believes that learning takes place everywhere, not just in the classroom, or by completing activities at home set by the school. It is equally important for children to have a supportive learning environment in the home and at school. This is why mutually respectful, inclusive parent-school partnerships are so vital to a child's educational and social well-being.

According to a 2014 survey - schools derived 13.3% of their budgets from fundraising - what is PV's take on this?

In our experience, schools feel pressured to shift more financial responsibility onto parents. If they can't get more funding through a “user pays” system, the reliance on fundraising increases. For disadvantaged communities this creates huge inequity issues as they do not have the same capacity to fundraise compared with wealthier communities.

As you can see in our policy below, fundraising is listed sixth of eight roles the parents club should include. We do not see it as the parents' responsibility to be funding anything at public schools – this is a requirement of the governments. However, we understand that many communities feel the need to raise additional funding for the ‘extras’ for their students.

We acknowledge that running fundraising events is a proven way of gaining parent participation. However, we are definite in our view that fundraising should never happen to fund those areas designated to be paid for from government grants. Nor should there ever be expectations put on school communities as a whole to run fundraising activities, or on individual families to participate in them. All too often our parents feel pressured to fundraise for the school, because, as they see it, “Who else would do it?”

(Parents Victoria policy - N.2 Parents Clubs)

(b) The role of the Parents Club should include:

(i) to provide an open forum for all parents to discuss issues concerned with the welfare and the general education policy of the school;

- (ii) to assist in the co-ordination of activities organised by other school groups, to promote the welfare of school community members and to stimulate interest in the school;*
- (iii) to assist in co-ordination of activities and co-operation with other State bodies organised to promote the welfare of all State schools;*
- (iv) to elect members of the Parents Club to the School Council as direct Parents Club representatives;*
- (v) to convey recommendations on school policy and other school matters to the School Council;*
- (vi) to receive or raise funds by itself or in co-operation with the School Council or other school groups and to assist in the provision of amenities for the school;*
- (vii) to conduct meetings in accordance with democratic procedures which will enable the participation of all parents in the school;*
- (viii) to conduct in-service activities on priorities relevant to the Government school system.*

Is in-kind support from parents making up for government shortfall in the areas of school maintenance, in-class student support etc - and should this be remedied?

Parents are sometimes being used in classrooms in place of additional staff. This is most likely due to budget constraints. While it is fine for a parent to, for example, listen to a young child read, and help where they can, it is not necessarily alright for a parent to be testing a child on their maths or spelling. Mostly parents are not equipped with the training or knowledge to undertake and report this properly.

The idea of using parents' skills and labour through working bees to maintain a school's grounds, buildings and equipment means a huge saving to the school's global budget. Whilst many parents enjoy this form of engagement with their child's school (particularly those employed during the week) it must be said that this is not optimal. School maintenance is the responsibility of the landlord (Government) and should be performed by qualified staff or contractors for work, health and safety reasons.

We expect the proper funding of our public schools to ensure that every classroom has the required number of qualified personnel available to it, and that all school maintenance is performed by qualified workers.

Not all of our school communities have the same capacity to attract volunteers to complete the required tasks so all the more reason for governments to invest and maintain their learning facilities for the future. School infrastructure and maintenance has been extremely topical in the last 10 years with the ageing of our public school buildings and predicted growing population figures.

What are some of the things that hold parents back from engaging with their schools?

Parents, particularly when their children start school, may be unaware of how they can be engaged in their child's school. Schools should inform them of all the ways they can be involved. Work commitments can make it difficult for parents to be involved *at* the school, but schools need to have options for those parents. There is always something that could be done outside of school hours (e.g. designing and contributing to the school website or electronic newsletter/blog) and parent clubs and school councils often have meetings after hours. Language and cultural barriers are often what stop some parents from engaging with schools. A good school leader will identify these barriers and work towards removing them.

Other barriers for parents include: old phobias (uncomfortable being in a school due to their own school experiences); lack of confidence (not aware of their own skills and abilities); school is (or appears to be) unwelcoming; lack of time; not feeling valued or welcome; transportation; and parents' special needs.

Is there such a thing as too much or the wrong type of parental involvement?

Parents Victoria does advise parents that they should always be respectful and reasonable when dealing with their school. Parents Victoria's information to parents includes providing them with background research, guidelines etc. so that parents can have informed conversations with their school.

The best approach is for schools and parents to work together to set requirements and boundaries. Mutual respect goes a long way to making partnerships successful.

Do you make a distinction between parental involvement and parental engagement?

At Parents Victoria we tend to use the words 'parent participation' in our policy. To us, this encompasses both involvement and engagement. Participation can mean physically at the school; as part of a parent club, school council or sub-committee; and at home, through supervising homework, reading, discussing the day's events. Really, the focus shouldn't be on what terminology is used, but rather ensuring schools and parents are true partners in children's learning.

Are you aware of pertinent statistics on the level of parental participation in Australian or Victorian schools - and are there any statistics you know of that juxtapose this with the school's demographic information?

Parents Victoria doesn't have those statistics, but you may find some useful information on the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau website. The Bureau is a joint project of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC). ACSSO represents the voice of parents in Australia's public schools. Parents Victoria, as the peak body representing Victorian public school parents, is the only Victorian affiliate to ACSSO. APC represents parents in the independent and Catholic sectors.

Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau www.familyschool.org.au
Bureau Research www.familyschool.org.au/what-we-do/research/original-bureau-research/

How does parent engagement support student outcomes?

Research from Australia and around the world, particularly from Harvard, U.S.A., Canada and Finland, consistently says better student outcomes are a direct benefit of parental engagement. Students feel more connected to their learning when they can see the direct engagement by their parents to their school.

The research shows that improved student outcomes due to parental engagement are both academic and also social, particularly at the primary level. Primary children, especially, love seeing their parents involved at their school.

For children

Improved social skills

Improved connections to their culture and sense of pride
Improved attitude and behaviour
Higher self-esteem and confidence
Improved numeracy and literacy outcomes

For Families

Greater understanding of their children's social, emotional and learning needs
Recognition of and strengthened ability to support their child's learning
Increased confidence and belief in what they can offer
Concerns addressed more quickly due to the positive relationship with staff

For schools

Improved staff morale
Reduced feeling of 'Us' and 'Them'
Enhanced outcomes through families supporting learning at home
Improvements in behaviour of children and young people

Parents Victoria doesn't have set statistics on these improved outcomes, but you may find some useful information on the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau website. The Bureau is a joint project of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC). ACSSO represents the voice of parents in Australia's public schools. Parents Victoria, as the peak body representing Victorian public school parents, is the only Victorian affiliate to ACSSO. APC represents parents in the independent and Catholic sectors.

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Bureau Research: www.familyschool.org.au/what-we-do/research/original-bureau-research/

Some schools facilitate the engagement of parents in student learning very effectively. What do these schools do well?

These schools know their school community. They have done their audience analysis and understand the needs and aspirations of these families. The school has identified the student and family interests and are able to match these to learning tasks/projects to engage effectively and respectfully. Some school leaders have permitted opportunities and been proactive in addressing the cultural diversity in their communities. Flexibility and motivation, making sure parents are encouraged not deterred, are key.

State governments have consistently acknowledged the importance of parent engagement in student learning, and parent engagement is one of the four key pillars of the federal government's [Student First](#) education policy platform. What role can governments and policy makers have in facilitating parent engagement?

Governments, advisors, policy makers and departmental staffers could play a significant role if there was bipartisan commitment to parental engagement or family-school partnerships. We need Governments to have legislation and/or policy that outline these commitments and then departmental staff/schools to actively implement these and facilitate in our school communities to reap the benefits for the future. In some communities parents feel disconnected or the school only wants them to engage in the areas of the school's choosing. We need to develop an understanding of each other, mutual and equally respected.

We need all school leaders to be committed and drive this direction in schools; to induct and train their teachers to have the same approach and support parents as partners in education. The case studies accessible in the below link, demonstrate how some school communities have done this effectively. Parents Victoria and our state and territory counterparts want this across the nation but as previously stated, we need commitment and continuity going forward to allow this to happen genuinely and effectively.

<http://www.familyschool.org.au/files/9413/7955/4757/framework.pdf>

Relevant Parents Victoria Policy

B.6 School annual program budgets

School annual program budgets should be drawn up by School Councils so that the amounts of money contributed by parents and the wider community i.e. locally-raised funds, are clearly set out separately from government grant monies.

Similarly, the annual budget should clearly set out the way locally-raised funds are spent, separate from government grant spending.

This budget must be presented at the annual public reporting meeting and a copy must also be given to each family at the time of the annual reporting meeting and whenever levies/voluntary contributions are requested. All in the school community must have full information about the annual budget so they can monitor the relative amounts of government and locally-raised income and expenditure and the ways in which they are spent.

Locally-raised funds are not to be used to pay for those areas designated to be paid for from government grants.

Pressure must not be placed on parents to pay levies/voluntary contributions.

Extensive participation by the school community in the budget preparation process should occur to determine the amount and purpose of all funds to be raised locally relative to that provided from government grants.

A representative sub-committee of the School Council, which includes members of the Parents' Club, should draft the program budget for presentation to the School Council for endorsement or otherwise.

E. Curriculum

1.1 Basic skills

- (a) School and home based activities intended to promote the development of basic skills should assume that all children have the capacity to learn, and the right to a supportive learning environment.
- (d) Emphasis should be placed on the development of basic skills through:
 - (i) Sound, imaginative, flexible and supportive teaching practice.
 - (ii) Participation of parents in the development of basic skills through effective home/school interaction.

1.6 Parents in curriculum

Parents Victoria urges the Department of Education to ensure that parents are made aware of their role and rights in the formulation of the policy and curriculum of their school and that greater encouragement is given by schools to parents to enable them to exercise such rights.

G.6 Representation

Parents Victoria believes that participation through representation is the only acceptable means of parent participation in the decision making process. It is only through participation that large numbers of parents can participate. In order for representation to be effective the following conditions are essential:

- (a) the representatives must be chosen by those they represent;

- (b) the views put forward by the representative must be consistent with those of the people they represent;
- (c) those who are represented must be kept informed of decisions being taken and the reasons for them.

N. Parents and community in schools

Learning is derived from all experiences, in a continuous and cumulative way. The various cultural frameworks form part of the known world a child brings to school. They include race, class, culture and gender and together they provide the filters through which all learning is screened. Schools must acknowledge, be informed by, and take into account all such frameworks.

Parents must be seen as essential partners whose collective knowledge provides the access teachers must have to the cultural frameworks or filters that impinge so much on a child's learning.

As research in Australia and overseas clearly demonstrates, learning and teaching become more effective when parents participate as equal partners with teachers, each sharing their special knowledge for the task.

N.1 Principles

Parents Victoria believes it is essential that:

- (a) there should be continuing interchange of ideas between schools and the community;
- (b) schools should be an integral part of modern community activities;
- (c) to ensure parents want to participate in schools, and the community is involved, effective communication processes and decision-making structures should be developed by and for parents, students, teachers and the community.

1.1 Encouraging community participation

- (a) Schools should be organised to enable parents, teachers, students and the wider community to contribute effectively to decision making on the educational management of the school.
- (b) Local communities should be encouraged to take an active part in the design and development of schools which will be part of the cultural, recreational and educational activities of that community.
- (c) School Community Officer positions should be geographically spread and shared equally amongst schools.
- (d) Learning programs should take into account the varied resources of the community.
- (e) A school's evaluation procedures should take into account the operations of the School Council and the relationship between the school and its community.

N.2 Parents Clubs

Parents Clubs are an essential structure to enable effective parent participation in a school. They provide the only forum where all parents can participate and develop a collective parent view.

The role of Parents Clubs should be recognised within a School Charter.

Parents Clubs are independent clubs and are not sub-committees of School Councils.

They are semi-autonomous bodies operating under Department regulations.

School Councils and Parents Clubs need to work together to identify school needs and priorities.

(a) There should be a minimum of one (1) Parents Club per school. However, when, as in a multi campus complex school, there are 2+ sites in a school, there should be a minimum of one (1) Parents Club on each site of the school.

(b) The role of the Parents Club should include:

(i) to provide an open forum for all parents to discuss issues concerned with the welfare and the general education policy of the school;

(ii) to assist in the co-ordination of activities organised by other school groups, to promote the welfare of school community members and to stimulate interest in the school;

(iii) to assist in co-ordination of activities and co-operation with other State bodies organised to promote the welfare of all State schools;

(iv) to elect members of the Parents Club to the School Council as direct Parents Club representatives;

(v) to convey recommendations on school policy and other school matters to the School Council;

(vi) to receive or raise funds by itself or in co-operation with the School Council or other school groups and to assist in the provision of amenities for the school;

(vii) to conduct meetings in accordance with democratic procedures which will enable the participation of all parents in the school;

(viii) to conduct in-service activities on priorities relevant to the Government school system.

O.3 Parents

0.3 Parents/Guardians

Parents Victoria believes that parents/guardians have a fundamental right to send their child to a government school which is free, secular, available to all and appropriate to the child's needs.

Parents/guardians have the right to participate in decision-making affecting their children.

Parents/guardians have the right for their views to be valued because they:

- . have a unique knowledge and understanding of their children;
- . are the first and most significant educators;
- . have talents, interests and energies which can enrich and diversify the life and programs of schools.

3.1 (a) Participation

Parents/guardians have the right to:

- (i) be members of a productive partnership with educators and other parents/guardians to promote and support quality learning for all young people.
- (ii) be educated about the school's programs, principles and aims.
- (iii) consultation before changes are made which affect the school climate.
- (iv) participate in evaluation procedures affecting their child's programs.
- (v) participate in decision-making at all levels.

(b) Information

Parents/guardians have the right to:

- (i) be provided with comprehensive information about the policies, programs and resources of the school.
- (ii) regular and useful reports on the progress of their child and discussion with those responsible for such reports.
- (iii) the child's cumulative school record – with the right to amend if it can be shown to be incorrect.
- (iv) obtain information about a program in which their child is engaged, the rationale for the program, the evaluation methods used, and the credentials and teaching methods of those implementing the program.
- (v) negotiate access to visit and observe any programs involving their child and to have access to those working with their child (teachers, principals, specialists)

3.2 (a) Safeguards

Parents/guardians have the right to:

- (i) demand that the government school system has certain standards that govern good practice including the provision of a balanced curriculum focused on students' present and future needs.
- (ii) expect safeguards which protect their children from physical, intellectual and emotional negligence or abuse.
- (iii) receive assurance that their school does not allow unauthorised invasions of their child's privacy or property.
- (iv) expect that parental permission is sought before physiological, psychiatric, or medical assessment and/or treatment of the child is undertaken and that they will receive a full written report following the child's assessment or treatment.
- (v) be involved at the earliest opportunity in the event their child is to be suspended or excluded from school. The student has the right to "due process", and parents/guardians and students have the right to be heard.
- (vi) have records and files treated confidentially so that privacy of parents/guardians and students is respected.
- (vii) an advocate chosen by the parent/guardian to support, plead, speak, read or write on his/her behalf.

(b) Appeal at All Levels

Parents/guardians have the right to:

- (i) appeal against decisions which they consider unsatisfactory.
- (ii) be informed of their lines of appeal to impartial arbitration.
- (iii) receive a written explanation which responds to their appeal and which they may require in pursuing their grievance.

(c)Withdrawal

Parents/guardians have the right to:

- (i) after consultation with the school, withdraw the child from a course or activity to which the parent has a genuine conscientious objection.
- (ii) expect that the child will be provided with an educationally sound alternative during this time.

3.3 Parents/Guardians Responsibilities

Parents/guardians have the responsibility to:

- (a) recognise and protect the rights of children.
- (b) promote the health and wellbeing of children.
- (c) provide a safe and supportive home environment.
- (d) seek to resolve conflict in a fair and non-violent way
- (e) seek information as needed.
- (f) exercise the right to participate in education at home and at school whenever possible.
- (g) assist the school to establish shared values and expectations.
- (h) support the implementation of school policies.
- (i) respect the right of all students, staff and school community members to learn and work in an environment free from aggression.