



Family-School Communication: How to Build and Maintain It

A report to Catholic School Parents Australia

September 2024

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Family is used instead of parent to recognise the various parenting situations in our schools and that it may not be the 'parent' but a grandparent, aunt, uncle, friend or step-parent who is the main contact for the school.

** Parent includes natural, adopted or foster parents, guardians or care givers of young people attending Catholic Schools.*

If a study or a quote contains the word parent, however, we stick to it when describing the findings.

Acknowledgments

This report has been produced after an initial period of interviews in 41 Catholic schools across Australia for Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA). The study is funded by the Australian Department of Education [ID: ESE 22 / 4192] and has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No HE 23 - 153, Valid to 09 / 11 / 2023). The research project has also been approved by the Directors of Catholic Education in each of the 15 directorates in which the research was conducted.

The research team would like to acknowledge and thank each of the 300 participating parents, school staff and principals who welcomed us into their schools and provided rich insights into their world where school-parent partnerships are flourishing, not because of any one program, digital App or the presence of a guru with unlimited wisdom. What we did see, hear and feel was the depth of authentic optimism and commitment to building partnerships displayed by so many parents, teachers and principals, reminiscent of the words of Helen Keller:

Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement; nothing can be done without hope.

We are grateful to CSPA for the opportunity to lead this research study and for the individual efforts of many of the executive who provided guidance, shared wisdom and the entrée to 41 amazing catholic schools. For most of this project we worked closely with John O'Brien, now retired Executive Officer of CSPA, a collaboration we both enjoyed and valued as the project unfolded.

Our thanks also extend to Barbara Barker from ARACY who generously shared her wisdom about research in schools. And, finally, to my Research Assistant, Steph Capra, well done and thank you. We were gifted with this opportunity to work with schools in an area we are both passionate about.

Leon Capra

Project Officer

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Purpose

In May 2023, Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) commissioned a research study titled **Family-School Communication: How to Build and Maintain It**. The study was initiated to understand the importance of effective communication between schools and families, particularly in the context of student outcomes. The research follows previous CSPA studies, such as the *Parent Perspectives on Student Wellbeing and Learning* (2022) and the *Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on School Students with Disability* (2023). These studies identified concern among families regarding the quality and extent of communication between schools and families, prompting CSPA to investigate further. The study aimed to explore why effective communication is crucial, why it remains challenging, and how teachers are prepared for engaging with parents.

1.2 Methodology

Evidence was gathered through interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, and principals, highlighting communication practices that effectively support family engagement. The study was conducted in collaboration with state and territory Catholic School Parent groups. A cross-section of 46 schools, representing diverse demographics and priority populations, was selected, although only 41 schools were able to participate. These schools included a mix of primary, secondary, and CARE / Flexi schools, and were located in capital cities, regional, and rural/remote areas across Australia with the exception of the Northern Territory. Each interview was recorded, converted to a transcription, anonymized and the schools de-identified using a coding system. The interviews were analyzed using a combination of some AI applications, thematic trends and highlighted particular strategies, actions and practices which the research team have identified as practical “tips” to share in the wider community of schools. These practical “takeaways” form **The Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (Addendum 1). These “takeaways” are referred to throughout this report and are explained in some detail (refer Addendum 1).

1.3 Key Findings

The findings garnered from the interviews are presented as insights from the three stakeholder groups, many in the words of the interviewees themselves which highlight what works to create effective communication which builds relationships. The themes which emerge from interviews include:

- the importance of effective school-family communication
- school culture which informs parent engagement
- communication that builds relationships
- school-family engagement for learning – the power of 3
- the key role of principals and teachers
- communication that finds families
- multiple channels of communication
- strategic approaches to finding the right mix of communications
- insights from priority parent groups
- how teachers are prepared for family engagement

1.4 Emerging Issues and Challenges

A number of emerging issues have surfaced in this study which add to the complexity of the process of building and maintaining effective engagement between schools and families. Five themes are identified for further discussion:

- meeting the communication needs of contemporary families

- expectations placed on school staff
- communication challenges which families encounter in times of transition
- reaching parents/families who are not engaging with the school
- joining the dots from school - family involvement to family engagement in learning.

1.5 Call to action

In seeking to share the communication practices “that work” in establishing relationships with families, the framework suggested in a Parent Involvement – Parent Engagement continuum prepared by ARACY (2018) – itself a modification of the Goodall and Montgomery (2104) Continuum, has been modified to provide schools with a means to determine where their actions to build partnerships with families sit in the Parent Involvement – Parent Engagement continuum. **A Toolbox of actions that work in schools**, containing many of the great ideas shared by schools in this study, has been developed to assist schools as they plan for different ways that their parents can engage in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

1.6 Recommendations

Several recommendations have emerged from this study including in short form:

For schools: to shift the focus from family involvement to family engagement.

For providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE): to more intentionally prepare beginning teachers to initiate and support family engagement.

For Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA): to amplify the need for more rigorous preparation of teachers and school leaders for family engagement.

For Catholic Education systems: to provide practical support for building the capacity of school leaders, teachers and families to engage in school – family partnerships which promote Learning by the Power of 3.

1.7 Conclusion

The analysis of these interviews was qualitative in nature, and while providing insights about a range of different themes and issues, it is not a statistical snapshot that could be used to make inferences about a wider population. What is known is that effective communication is fundamental to building strong partnerships between families and schools, which in turn improves student outcomes. Every stakeholder interviewed emphasized the centrality of communication in fostering relationships, supporting the school’s mission, and promoting student learning and wellbeing. For Catholic schools, the support of families, the primary and principal educators of their children, is central to the lived faith, mission and vision of the school.

2. Overview

2.1 Background

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) is recognised as the national body representing and advocating for the families of over 805 000 children and young people who attend the 1756 Catholic schools across Australia. (Source NCEC 'Spotlight' September 2024) CSPA works in collaboration and consultation with the National Catholic Education Commission and is recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education.

In May 2023, CSPA commissioned a small research study entitled: Family-School Communication: How to build and maintain it. This research study followed a number of recent studies by CSPA, including the *Parent Perspectives on Student Wellbeing and Learning* (2022), conducted in a partnership with Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the *Review of the impact of COVID – 19 on school students with disability* (2023). Both studies highlighted some concern among parents about the quality and extent of communication between the school and families, leading the organisation to initiate this current project.

CSPA was interested in understanding why effective communication is important to families and school personnel and why it is so challenging, given that effective partnerships between families and teachers are essential to improving learning outcomes for students. Additionally, there is interest in how teachers are prepared for the essential work of engaging with families.

In pre-planning for this project, ethical clearance for the research was not considered necessary. However, after several Directors of Catholic Education around the country requested ethical clearance before agreeing to be part of the study, Research Ethics approval was sought from the University of New England. Approval granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No HE 23 - 153 Valid to 09/11/2024), with subsequent approval from the Executive Directors of Catholic Education in dioceses where the research was undertaken.

Evidence was gathered using one – on - one interviews and some small focus group discussions with parents, teachers and principals. The interviews primarily focused on what communication practices and actions school communities utilised with some success to build and support family engagement. With the support of state and territory parent organisations under the CSPA umbrella, a cross-section of schools was suggested representing the more dominant demographics, and also from priority populations that include:

- a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- b) Families of students with diverse learning needs
- c) Families with students more disengaged from schooling
- d) Families with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD)
- e) Families from remote geographical locations f) Boarding school families; and
- f) Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

2.2 Methodology

Consistent with the approach preferred by Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA), the researchers invited the leadership of State and Territory Catholic School Parent groups to identify school communities which demonstrated contemporary expertise in the area of school-home communication and engagement. Once provided, the research team prepared a matrix of schools which included more dominant parent demographics, the Priority Parent Populations as well as a cross-section of schools including Primary, Secondary, P/K/R – 12, Care/Flexi schools, Diocesan schools and independent Religious Institute schools and finally geographic location.

In all, 46 schools were selected for the on-site interview phase of the project although not all schools invited to participate took up the offer, resulting in 41 schools being included in the research study.

Evidence was collected in interviews using questions developed by the project team with some slight variation across the three major stakeholder groups interviewed:

- Parents
- Teachers (including some support staff) and
- Principals or Heads of Campus (Multi-campus, CARE and Flexi schools).

The question sequence is included in Appendices A, B and C. While the majority of interviews were conducted one-on-one, some included smaller groups ranging from two to five, with three focus groups including up to ten people. While not ideal for recording, each of these larger groups was suggested by principals for particular reasons which included connecting with a Learn to Speak English class, a leadership team meeting and a group of parents attending a Play Group sponsored by the school.

Most of the interviews were conducted on site in 40 of 41 school locations, with one school preferring phone interviews and with others in individual schools opting for phone or Teams interviews.

All interviews were recorded, anonymized and the schools de-identified using a coding system including stakeholder group, school and state. The number of people interviewed in each school ranged from five to fifteen.

Table 1 Interviews: Geographic Location

State / Territory	Capital	Regional	Rural / remote	Total
Australian Capital Territory	3	-	-	3 (7.3%)
New South Wales	2	4	4	10 (24.4%)
Northern Territory	-	-	-	0 (0 %)
Queensland	3	7	-	10 (24.4%)
South Australia	2	1	-	3 (7.3%)
Tasmania	2	1	-	3 (7.3%)
Victoria	4	-	-	4 (9.75%)
Western Australia	3	4	1	8 (19.5%)
Total	19	17	5	100.0%

Of the 41 schools involved in the study, 38 were Archdiocesan or Diocesan schools and three were Religious Institute schools. In the mix of schools there were two Boarding Schools and two schools which shared boarding facilities with other schools in the regional town where they were located.

Table 2: Breakdown of School Types

School Type	Single sex	Co-educational
Primary		23
Secondary	2	8
Pre/ Reception/Kinder – Yr 12	1	5
CARE / Flexible Learning Centre		2
Total	3	38

Table 3 Interviews: Stakeholder Distribution

Interview group	No of interviews	No of participants
Parents / carers	106	123
Principals / heads of campus	41	41
Teachers / support staff	108	136
Total	255	300

The interviews provided rich data which has been analyzed using a combination of some AI applications, thematic trends and highlighting particular strategies, actions and practices which the research team have identified as practical “tips” to share in the wider community of schools. These practical “takeaways” form the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** and are briefly highlighted throughout this report to illustrate effective practices which can potentially enhance parent engagement, with full list and description in Addendum1.

2.3 Limitations

Other recent studies undertaken by CSPA have highlighted barriers to communication and the concerns of parents about communication generally. This project sought to identify effective practices which were conducive to building relationships that can lead to effective parent engagement. While this study has highlighted some rich data around practices which build effective communication, the sample size is relatively small. However, the shared wisdom garnered by asking for the views and experience of 300 parents, staff and principals in 41 schools identified because of their positive efforts to engage with families, provides a good starting point for school communities who wish to move from what Karen Mapp, a guru in the Parent Engagement field calls “random acts of family engagement” to more purposeful actions which will enhance and inform authentic parent engagement. (Mapp,2017).

Key Findings 3 - 14

3. Begin with the WHY: Why is effective school-parent communication important for parent engagement?

This study focuses on the perceptions of parents, teachers and principals about what contributes to the process that leads to improved outcomes for students. Evidence suggests that if schools and families want their children and young people to succeed, they need to prioritise building relationships with their families that support information sharing and learning. Weinzapfel (2022, p. 3) suggests that the key to unlocking the way to parent engagement, is unambiguous:

The key to effective family engagement is relationship building and relationships start with effective communication.

Numerous stakeholders interviewed stated their belief that effective communication is central to the partnership between the school and families:

Communication is the cornerstone of our work. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Victoria)

It's the soul of our role. (Principal, rural primary school, NSW)

Every person interviewed endorsed the importance of effective communication in the school-parent context with some nuanced, though complementary, views about the **why** or reasons for communication being of such significance. Three underlying imperatives emerged from the conversations with the three stakeholder groups:

- communication is part of the lived faith, vision and mission of the school;
- communication is instrumental in building relationships; and overwhelmingly,
- communication is the foundation for partnerships which promote student learning and wellbeing.

3.1 Communication is part of the lived Faith, Vision and Mission of the school

While Catholic schools are not alone in promoting the primacy of parents as first educators, the church has been unequivocal in stating the role of parents as first educators:

Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators. (Gravissimum Educationis, 3)

Learning happens in the everyday moments parents share with their children, highlighting the important role families have in child development and learning. As an extension of the home, schools partner, not take over, the learning of children and young people.

Many Principals articulated that their approach to communicating with parents was strongly influenced by the vision and mission of the school:

(communication) aligns to our Catholic mission, that intention to engage with parents as first educators. (Principal, regional P -12 college, Qld)

Parents too identified the faith ethos of the school as a driver for effective communication:

They're very inclusive, and they are definitely about community, and about upholding the ideals of Catholicism that are about including people, including a wide breadth of people as well. (Parent, outer metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

3.2 Communication is instrumental in building relationships

A piece of wisdom shared by a parent interviewed for this study highlights the significance of building relationships with families:

Working with the school requires a more relational than transactional approach. (Parent, Regional secondary college, Qld)

Another parent expressed her belief that:

Teaching is all about building relationships ... take the time to reach out in whatever way it takes to build a relationship. (Parent, regional secondary college, WA)

The mindset that parents are partners rather than clients requires both parents and teachers (the school) to work together to build relationships. Many have shared their experience that building takes time and can be challenging:

Remember that all relationships require hard work at times. (Teacher, metropolitan R – 12 College, SA)

If family engagement is a priority for schools, then building successful relationships with all families should be intentional and embedded into the procedures, practices and culture of the school. Several principals highlighted this approach as foundational to their work:

Part of the relationship with families that I've talked about would be a bit like you have a relationship with your doctor or any other professional. We honour that relationship we have with the parent, because they've entrusted the education and care of their child to us. So, we have a professional responsibility to keep them informed about the things we're doing. (Principal, Metropolitan R – 12 college, SA).

Teachers also spoke about the importance of building relationships not just with children and young people but also with their parents:

Building that relationship with parents just like you build with your students, you have to get to know the students to be able to teach them well. We have to know their parents well to be able to know our students. (Teacher, rural primary school, NSW)

Another teacher spoke from the perspective of building trust:

Sometimes, by listening to their stories ... we can let them know we can help you with that and helping them with not just school things. That's how you build your relationship and trust with parents. Because otherwise it's just school doing the work. (Teacher, Metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Relationships initiated by effective communication and founded on mutual respect result in both parents and teachers feeling and being valued, which is bound to impact on both student learning and wellbeing. Constantino (2021, p 120) suggests that:

There can be no relationship building without trust. Often disengaged parents are distrusting of the school system. Either their children have had negative experiences, or they hearken back to their own school experience that planted seeds of distrust before their children attended school.

3.3 Communication is the foundation for building school-parent partnership

Weinzaphel (2020 p5) refers to the information provided by parents about their children as the “power” which informs learning:

Parents and caregivers have the information we need. When students walk into our classrooms, they don't come in as blank slates, ready to be filled up with knowledge. They have histories. They have strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and attitudes and personalities, all of which can factor into how successful students will be in classrooms. And, who better to tell us those things than parents? Parents are truly the keepers of the knowledge that we need to help students succeed.

Most families want the best for their children and need to feel they will be welcome when venturing into the school, which is not always as easy as it may seem:

For some parents, coming to school is their first step out of their home. (Cultural liaison teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)



Debbie Pushor - *Parent Engagement is part of a continuum*, Family Engagement Primary Workshop Two: Home-School Connections for Primary Student Learning. www.parentengagementcspa.edu.au (2024).

In the move towards family engagement in learning, schools need to do more than communicate information out to parents. Everything from how families are welcomed, how easy it is to access the school and its communication channels, how the school facilitates engagement and how families “learn about learning” are challenges which move the narrative to engagement rather than passive attendance or reception of information. This quote from *Advancing Partnerships – Parent and Community Framework*, 2023, p. 5) elaborates on this theme:

To have a significant impact on student outcomes, communication needs to be focused on student learning and wellbeing. It must also be a genuine exchange of information and ideas between the student, the school, the home and the community. Schools have a responsibility to help parents understand the ‘language of learning’ including the terms used by teachers in the classroom with students to communicate learning goals and expectations. This will assist parents to discuss learning with their child at home and to effectively communicate with teachers using a common language.

Families express a desire to have more assistance from the school to enable them to support learning:

We would like to know more about the Curriculum Just a snapshot of what the class was doing at present so we could support, ask questions of our children and make this a good form of connection with their learning. (Parent, outer metropolitan primary school, Tasmania)

An effective communication process enables families to be involved and extend the learning experience at home. When parents know what their child is working on, they can reinforce concepts and skills. Many teachers appreciated the partnership with parents and pointed to ways in which the school supported this commitment:

The school has an efficient communication system, providing regular updates on individual students through its App. The staff values parental contributions and recognizes the importance of maintaining open channels. The school's approachability and willingness to engage parents are key to building trust. (Teacher, metropolitan secondary college, Qld).

Other teachers suggested that having regular check-ins and affirming the work of parents was important for building partnerships.

A recent AITSL Spotlight document (2024, p4) recommended that:

To maximise the positive impacts of parental engagement, schools need to consider how best to tailor parent-school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning. Maintaining the tailored communication strategy as children get older may also encourage parents to continue engaging with the school.

An added outcome of bringing families along on the learning journey identified by Barker and Harris (2020, p.5) is that:

Involving parents and families is an important and valuable endeavour in and of itself, because of the ways in which it can help parents and families build a sense of belonging to their school community, which in turn can demonstrate to a student that their family values and supports their education.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (refer Addendum 1), the **Make it about Learning** actions describe how schools interact successfully to support families to focus on the learning and wellbeing of their children and young people.

4. The culture that makes family engagement possible

Unless the collective beliefs, values, assumptions, actions, attitudes and rituals of the school explicitly embrace and commit to family engagement, it is highly unlikely that authentic family engagement will occur in a school setting. A supportive culture and school climate are major indicators of the value placed on parent input and the place of parent partnerships. Constantino (2021, p 62) rates Culture as the foundation of parent engagement:

Creating a culture and climate for family engagement is the first and most important step in a process to bring about systematic reform in family engagement.



Constantino, S. *Engage Every Family: Five Simple Principles*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin (2016).

One of the key Domains in school improvement embedded in the ACER School Improvement Tool (2023) is Domain 3 which highlights a Culture that promotes Learning. A recent survey of principals of schools with strong improvement data in Queensland, featured in an AITSL Spotlight paper on School Improvement (2022,) invited principals to name the essential elements of a culture that promotes learning. Those key elements named by principals were:

- understanding the importance of positive relationships;
- promoting high expectations for all students; and
- inclusive interactions between staff, students and families.

These findings resonate with the insights of families, teachers and principals in this current study highlighting the significance of school culture in laying the foundation for effective parent engagement. Three broad themes describe how the richness of school culture impacts so directly on the ways that schools communicate and build relationships with families: first impressions, personal connection, an open and proactive communication.

4.1 First impressions: a welcoming and inclusive community

Creating a warm and inviting atmosphere for families with priority given to parents' initial interactions with the school prior to the enrolment of their children, the front office experience, accessibility, providing dedicated parent spaces, friendly signage, and opportunities for informal interactions with staff are all positive first impressions that can go a long way in encouraging parent engagement. Parent comments about their first impressions of the school are indicative of these first encounters:

I think it's a great culture. It's very welcoming, very reassuring. You never feel like you're a burden. I always get a response to my emails or my phone calls. (Parent, regional secondary college, Queensland)

Many parents interviewed made mention of the role of office staff in creating a warm, welcoming reception, typified by this comment:

The office staff are very friendly. So that's always an open communication network, you are not a stranger walking in the door. You've got that happy, friendly environment that you walk into. If you have a relationship with the office staff, it then obviously extends on to the classroom. You feel welcome the minute you're walking in the door. (Parent, regional R – 12 College, SA)

Teachers were often aware of their impact on families by giving priority to welcoming parents:

I think going out of your way to welcome people and make them feel like they belong in a place makes a really big difference. We have to put the work in place as well to make sure of that. (Teacher, rural primary school, Tasmania)

Constantino (2021, p127) reminds schools of the impact of first impressions on visitors – even suggesting that families could be regarded as guests rather than visitors:

Guests are those that have an open invitation and for whose arrival and visit we plan in order to ensure a positive experience. A visitor is someone we do not invite or for whom we do not plan and with the hope that they won't stay long.

The goal is to create an environment where families feel welcomed, heard, and valued as partners in their child's education. Effective communication helps build trust, address concerns promptly, and foster a strong sense of community within the school. A positive first impression can go a long way in encouraging parent engagement.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (refer Addendum 1), the **Messages in the physical environment of the school** are actions that schools consider as families enter the school grounds, and the **First Responders** actions describe how schools interact successfully with families as they enter the school.

4.2 Personal connections and relationships

Schools which prioritise opportunities for face-to-face interactions between parents and staff find that these personal connections help build trust and stronger relationships between parents and teachers. Whether it is in the form of Parent-teacher learning conversations, open classroom sessions, information nights, events like barbecues, picnics in the school grounds – even the 100 club (described in the **Toolbox of actions that work in school: Whatever it takes**) allow parents to interact with teachers, see their child's work, and get to know the school community.

Building personal connections and relationships between teachers, families, and students is crucial for effective communication and student success in schools. Teachers emphasize the importance of investing time upfront to get to know families and students, with one teacher suggesting that delaying academic tasks initially may enable the development of positive relationships with families.

For me with prep it alleviates a lot of anxiety about what's happening at school. I think it's really important that we develop really positive relationships with the parents where if they ever feel like they can't answer a question that they're quite welcome to ask anything. No question is silly.

Because often, it's their first introduction to formal school. (Teacher, regional primary school, Qld)

The use of first names in conversations, class communications to families and even in more general communication with families is indicative of mutual respect and valuing families as partners. Families value teachers who demonstrate genuine care, follow up on concerns, and share specific details about their child's progress and needs, which is made possible when staff make it a priority to connect with students and families regularly.

The following up things I think is important. They'll remember and then follow up a week or two later with me or the student. It seems to me that they've really thought about this and they remember it and they're following up and I can think of a few teachers who do that well. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Tasmania)

Establishing positive relationships from the start also facilitates open communication when addressing sensitive issues should that be required at some later date. One middle leader spoke of his advice to his team:

I like to think I'm talking about positive information. It's something that I would encourage teachers to do, to build that relationship with families and have that open communication with them. I think this makes it easier to have the trickier conversations, once you've already built that relationship with families and making yourself visible to them. (Middle leader, metropolitan R-12 College, SA)

Several teachers shared examples about the way in which they made personal connections:

We try to come from a parent perspective, to be gentle and soft in approach. We come from a place of care, and compassion, and kindness, and I think that that's probably where you get the most success is when you do that. (Assistant Principal, regional secondary college, WA)

To support some families for whom English was a second language, one teacher recorded "how to" videos demonstrating how to help with their own child and to give parents a point of connection for a home conversation about their learning:

I sent homework home and actually recorded videos of what it actually looked like, so they could actually play the videos and see it in action. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, WA)

Effective personal connections require consistent effort from all parties - teachers being accessible and transparent, families being engaged, and schools providing platforms for relationship-building. This foundation of trust and mutual understanding enables more productive conversations around sensitive topics like learning difficulties or behavioural concerns.

Reflecting on the culture of the school which encouraged and supported staff to reach out to families to build those personal connections, one beginning teacher recalled:

The principal was talking about how you have to have this positive, unconditional regard for kids, and how everything we do needs to keep that positive regard. No matter what's happening, we need to keep the positive light as much as possible especially when things really become stressful, to see them in this way that we deal with things, and I think that really helps with parent communication. (Teacher, rural primary school, NSW)

This positive, child-centered mindset helps foster open communication between teachers and parents. It prevents misunderstandings that could arise if parents feel they are being criticized or judged. Instead, the focus remains on collaborating to support the child's well-being. For parents, this connection with teachers and the school more broadly builds confidence in the professionalism of the staff and their competence in working with parents as partners.

For me personally they're very proactive. Some of the leadership team are lovely, even just giving me their mobile number, and I can text them every now and again, if I'm really stuck, just little things like that. I'm conscious of not abusing that. But they're just always kind of being around I always see their faces and they're always kind of checking in. (Parent of student with a challenging disability, metropolitan primary school, Tasmania)

Several parents related their experience with schools that supported them through natural disaster, personal family breakdown, domestic violence and for one mother, her own disability.

It was, from my personal perspective, whenever I went to school, I wasn't made to feel I was some sort of weird person. Like, because I walk on crutches and have cerebral palsy is quite significant. I wasn't made to feel like you just go sit in the corner and you don't matter. In fact I was made to feel just like everybody else only I walk differently, which is exactly how I see my disability. I don't want that to become their focus, when their focus should be on my child. (Parent, rural primary school, Tasmania)

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (refer Addendum 1) the **Make communication personal** actions describe how some schools interact successfully and build lasting connections with families and the **When the going gets tough** actions describe how some schools venture into the above and beyond to engage with parents in exceptional circumstances. In **Whatever it takes** there are examples of actions taken by school communities prepared to step outside the comfort zone, to try something out of left field which will engage families.

4.3 Open and Responsive Communication

The descriptors “open” and “responsive” describe qualities of communication which have often been identified as problematic in parent evaluation of school communication. As recently as 2024, the ARACY Report: Home-School Communication in Catholic Schools provided some analysis of parent comments about school-home communication made in several CSPA surveys from 2022 and 2023. Of the themes describing what doesn't work for parents, two of the four prominent issues parents raised were:

- **Communication is unresponsive:** the issue which featured as most problematic evidenced at best by slow response times and at worst by a lack of response to requests for information, opportunities to meet and/or discuss concerns about their children's progress or wellbeing, and
- **Who do I contact?** indicating a lack of clarity about who, when and how to contact staff.

The evidence collected in this current study paints a more positive picture in this sample of schools where it was more common practice for open and transparent dialogue between parents and teachers. These schools provided multiple channels for parents to voice their concerns, ask questions, and share feedback.

In their quest for authentic partnership with families, principals were acutely aware of building those effective points of connection which provide the responsiveness and clarity that are essential for engaging parents:

We don't educate in isolation. It's a triangle of connections, school, parents and family, and students. We have to be interrelated to each other; we have to be connecting. Because we go on this journey together, you can't educate in isolation. So, we are deliberately trying to improve the way we're engaging with parents. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld.)

For parents, there is a heightened level of comfort and confidence when they know and have a connection with who it is they will be working with at the school:

Just knowing that, if there is a problem, they will contact us, because they are very open with their communication. (Parent, primary school, ACT)

They've got really good checking points for parents, they tell you who to go to, if this happens, who not to, you know, how do they get to this point, if this happens, you need to know this, go through your house system. So, at every point, they open up so many different pathways to engage. (Parent, regional secondary college, NSW)

And from a teacher who understood the need to be responsive to parents:

Our approach to parent questions and concerns is to deal with it early – have a quick turnaround to avoid any unnecessary frustration, anxiety and negativity. (Teacher, rural primary school, Qld.)



The Flamboyant Foundation. *Keep it real - REAL Family Engagement* (2023).

Moving from a one-way, one size fits all, endless flow of information to more purposeful and nuanced communication is complex and challenging, particularly in a secondary setting. Schools are recognising the disconnect between some families and the school by positioning for better two-way communication which supports open and transparent dialogue between families and teachers. Amongst the practical strategies utilised in schools to make for more inclusive and responsive communication are:

- Making staff professional email addresses available for families:
Having direct email addresses of the teachers gives me my personal connection to my child's teacher (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)
- Developing a process for contacting staff including a protocol for respectful two-way communication.
- Providing a communication chart showing families who to contact, about what and how to contact these people.

Schools which have shifted to more effectively responding to families and bringing them on the learning journey of their children have recognised that mode of communication is often a barrier which needs to be addressed:

Schools need to rethink their role in being in dialogue with families rather than a monologue about how we will tell you what you need. In that way, families are kind of always in deficit. There's something wrong with families, something that needs to be fixed. It's not that the families don't have a whole lot of assets and things that they bring, they are often not valued. It's through dialogue and for schools to do a whole lot more listening than is probably the traditional way.
(Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Initiatives designed to recognise that family engagement can occur in different ways and respond to the differing family demographics are more likely to occur in a school community where the narrative speaks of good relationships and strong partnerships. Those initiatives have potential to build a connection strategy focusing on the bi-directional nature of the parent-school relationship. (Spotlight Paper: *Strengthening Parent Engagement to improve student learning*, AITSL, 2024, P 11).

- Seeking feedback from families about how to tailor their communication methods to suit the needs and preferences of their community.
- Better use of analytics to make improvements to communications:

There are other avenues to look a bit deeper into engagement and the behaviour patterns of people and think creatively of ways to leverage that to grow the college, to improve whatever our content is to get even better engagement, to target strong engagement from parents. (ICT Liaison officer, metro secondary college, WA)

The mindset which enables openness to questions and concerns and being prepared to respond to these in an honest and respectful manner ensures that families feel listened to and their efforts in engaging with their child's learning are valued and supported.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (refer Addendum 1), the **Who's who in the zoo**, describes additional actions taken by school communities which provide clarity and commitment to creating the two-way dialogue which is necessary to engage families.

5. Communication that builds relationships

Effective communication is crucial for building strong relationships between schools, teachers, families, and students. Many have commented on how building relationships can be challenging and time consuming and as this teacher reflected, that commitment pays off:

I'm a people person and I always feel that it might seem like it takes a lot of time initially to build that relationship. But once you put that time into building relationships with the families, I think it makes your whole year so much better. (Teacher, regional primary school, Qld).

Some of the successes that come from investing time in the two-way communication include:

5.1 Building trust and understanding

Open and honest communication helps build trust between teachers and families. When families feel informed and heard, they develop confidence that the school has their child's best interests in mind. This mutual understanding lays the foundation for a collaborative relationship.

When you can come to a level of understanding of (parents) or them feeling safe, they change when they feel they are no longer a number. If the parent feels safe, they feel that their child is safe. So, it's not always just about the child actually being safe. It's about the parents feeling safe themselves. (Teacher, metro primary, Victoria)

The importance of building trust cannot be underestimated, particularly in school communities where many families have had a very different experience of schools elsewhere. In one of those schools with families predominantly from overseas countries staff identified several practices which built trust and understanding (metropolitan primary school, Victoria):

- Accessibility and friendliness of staff
- Leadership and modelling by the principal
- Parents welcome in the classrooms
- Handling of sensitive matters to do with child/ren in person or by phone.

In another setting, the importance of building trust in the transition from primary to secondary school requires sensitivity and a focus on what matters most to families:

I think transparency is important, and always reassuring the parent that you are working in the best interest of the child, that there is no hidden agenda, only the child's wellbeing and learning experience. I think that's really important in building trust. (Teacher, metropolitan secondary college, WA)

What is clear is that providing both the warm welcome and the regular opportunities for families to be part of what their children were doing at school is significant:

For me, it's important that we invite the parents into our space – the classroom, the school and the events. (Teacher, regional primary school, Qld)

5.2 Fostering a sense of community

Regular communication invites families to be valued members of the school community. Frequent updates, face-to-face meetings, and a welcoming environment help families feel engaged and part of their child's educational journey. This is not the exclusive responsibility of the school staff. Many families recognise that they too have a responsibility to contribute to the building of the community:

I know how critical building relationships with staff in schools is, and I think it's really important we have a presence in school. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Qld.)

It's certainly not the teacher's job to raise our children. They see our children more than we do some weeks. So, if we're not involved in that, we need to get to know each other. (Parent, regional primary school, WA)

Being included in the communication from the school is important for families in terms of building relationships requiring commitment and contribution from all involved, a team approach described by many as the three-way partnership made possible by effective communication.

I think when they come into a school setting, they know their child better than I do. I think we're a team. When I work together with parents, the first thing I say is that this is a team effort here, and we work together. That's the way I feel that we achieved the best learning outcomes for the children. (Teacher, rural primary school, NSW)

The sense of belonging to the school community experienced by one parent and her family led her to reflect that:

In this school you feel that you are in your own home. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

5.3 Addressing issues proactively

Transparent communication allows teachers to address concerns or struggles early on before they escalate. This proactive approach prevents surprises and helps resolve issues collaboratively with families' contribution. Families who experience a delay in obtaining a response to an enquiry can be frustrated with the absence of timely and complete information, particularly if related to an incident involving their child.

We had to request a face-to-face meeting so that we could get the full story. Face-to-face is always going to be a better form of communication for me. Once you actually get to talking (the school) you realise that these are just everyday people, parents like you who've got a job to do. It does help them understand a little bit more that something's out of their control. (Parent, rural primary school, WA)

One of the insights shared by a primary school teacher reflected his approach to making early contact with families when he had concerns for a student. Keeping ahead of the communication cycle and preempting unnecessary angst was important:

The big thing is just about being open and honest with parents, as well as not leaving things to surprises. So, if a student is struggling to adjust in a situation it's just about having those conversations with the parents early, just to set it up, and just don't get overwhelmed with it, don't let it take over. Just don't let it build up. Because you don't really want the parents to get the surprise when it comes to interviews or reports. (Teacher, metropolitan primary, NSW)

Front office staff are remarkable in their capacity to pick up information from the many daily interactions they have with families, staff, students and visitors:

We learn a lot from parent enquiries, so we encourage parents to contact the school. You need to be able to communicate with each other, and openly and honestly as you can, which makes for a better working school, basically, between the parents and ourselves. They feel comfortable just to be able to step forward or ask a question or whatever that might be. There are no silly questions. Because quite often, they might come up and ask about something and you may not know the answer and wonder, who else doesn't know? (Receptionist, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Staff who are attuned to the daily conversations with families are well placed to alert the leadership of the school to communication glitches where information has not been communicated or not communicated well. The capacity to respond in a timely manner and provide clarity about issues builds confidence with families who can see that the school is well organized and in touch with families.

5.4 Know your families

Knowing students' families is crucial for effective communication and building strong relationships. Effective communication enables teachers to understand each student's unique needs, family dynamics, and background. To get to that place, teachers need to step out of their comfort zone and enter the world of their students' families – to step in their shoes. This personalized approach strengthens the teacher-family partnership and tailors support for the child.

The importance of knowing families and the family background is prerequisite to engagement with families. This contextual knowledge helps teachers communicate in a culturally sensitive and empathetic manner, as this pastoral leader acknowledges:

Understanding the background, finding out from the parents and allowing them to have their voice. I think that's really important that they know we're not going to have a preconceived idea about them. Every student in general is unique and individual. So, getting that parent involvement and getting their voice as well as the students is the most important thing. We need to know how they see things and what they want or what they need. (Teacher, R-12 Metro college, SA)

Parents want to be able to converse with teachers, knowing that they will be heard and their views respected:

There's one important thing to remember, don't assume. Don't assume this is what parents want to know. (Teachers) need to listen more than talk sometimes. If you're just talking about what you think's important, you miss the opportunity to actually get up to speed with what other people tell you what they think is important. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

Parents who felt personally connected to their school, pointed to some of the actions which they valued:

The school takes the time to get to know me and my kids, our family circumstances and challenges. For a family who has a child with a disability, that's important. The school helped in finding me a staff member to whom I could relate and go to. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

What works for me? A direct line of communication with my child's teachers. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW).

They're not scared of picking up the phone. (Parent, Metro secondary college, WA)

Parents value being able to directly contact and receive communication from their children's teachers. They felt this open line of communication was crucial for addressing their child's needs, discussing learning goals, and staying informed about their progress and any issues at school. They were also mindful of the two-way responsibility for communicating with teachers:

I have no desire to tell them what to do whatsoever. But I have to remind myself, I do know my own child probably best. They remind me of that, which is lovely. (Parent, metro primary school, Tasmania)

Parents need to step up. Parents have a significant role as well. My child is my responsibility ... we work together. (Parent, metropolitan Care school, WA)

Many principals shared this perspective on making the connection with families personal:

I meet and greet parents; I ensure that what their family needs no matter how trivial it might seem to me when they come to me with an issue. If the issue is important to them, it's important to meet to try to be where they are, financially, or emotionally, whatever it might be. (Principal, regional primary school, Qld)

A classroom teacher talked about how he set about connecting with parents:

I took the approach of paying attention to kids who may go under the radar or have been a concern in previous years. I made a point of observing them and emailing parents with good news stories about learning/social interactions and acts of kindness. This approach builds a huge bridge of trust with parents. (Teacher, regional primary school, Qld)

And from another teacher conscious of the number of parents with Fly in Fly out partners:

You could be the first adult they've spoken to in three days! (Teacher, regional primary school, WA).

School staff highlight the importance of being non-judgmental when communicating with parents and students:

Stuff happens, people are people, and we all manage and deal with things differently. (Teacher, regional primary school, NSW).

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (refer Addendum 1), the **Meet every family by Easter**, describes actions taken by school staff to make it a priority early each school year to engage with families and provide a personal connection which can build relationships. Additionally, the **Meet every teacher by Easter**, describes actions taken by families to make it a priority early each school year to engage with teachers and provide a personal connection which can build relationships.

Another way that parents appreciated the commitment to communication from school staff is their recognition that “it starts on the ground”:

They do it on the ground face-to-face, taking the opportunity to see parents outside in the grounds. (Parent, regional primary school, Qld)

She does a lot of business on the footpath in the morning. She touches base with parents. And she's nipping little things in the bud. I noticed a big difference with her style of leadership in that things don't become problems, because she's really into very early intervention. Parents can come up and have a two-minute chitchat on the footpath. And it's like, okay, I'll keep an eye on that, and it never comes to a formal meeting in the principal's office, because it's been a big problem. (Parent, rural primary school, Qld)

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** (refer Addendum 1), **It starts on the ground** describes actions taken by teachers and principals to engage with parents by being present and approachable when families are around.

5.5 Valuing parent voice and feedback

Lifting school-family communication to a higher level of engagement with families requires schools to provide authentic ways to encourage parent voice in the school around matters such as school's communication strategies and decision-making processes and most importantly, their child's learning.

Parent voice can often be confused as gaining consensus rather than gathering valuable input. In its weakest form, it may be conducting an annual survey to gauge family satisfaction yet making no alterations for the next academic year in response to that feedback. Weinzaphel (2022) p 24 advocates for authentic parent voice which aims to find parent perspective of the needs of their children

If we really value families, and we believe that education is a partnership, we owe it to our families to not only hear their thoughts, opinions and ideas, but incorporate them into our education process. In the end that will make for a stronger education system, one that works for and with families, not against them.

Some key points raised in this study include:

- The school's strategic plan specifically focuses on family engagement and community engagement, incorporating the parent voice through surveys, consultation processes, social

media, and school social events and a regular presence for families to engage in casual conversations.

- Using results to identify priorities to help determine the key priorities going forward. Without this information it will be impossible to know whether any efforts taken to strengthen the culture of relationship-based engagement is having a positive impact.
- Engaging families in decision making around the way the school communicates by asking parents for suggestions to tailor the communication strategy to suit the needs of families. One principal gave an example of the responsiveness of the school by implementing input and suggestions from parents:

Our parents are feeling that they can engage with the school, they can make suggestions, they can question things, they can come up with that brilliant idea of having a fridge magnet school calendar and then see that idea come to fruition with the school support. (Refer to action 40 in Toolbox of actions that work in schools). (Principal, primary school, ACT)

- Seeking parent voice highlights the school's culture of honesty and transparency, with regular communication and feedback loops to improve processes and events.
- Involving families in decision-making processes like school improvement plans makes them feel valued. An example provided by a principal centred on a proposed implementation of a mobile phone policy:

The mobile phones policy is a good example. We brought in a mobile phone policy around student use of mobile phones. We did want to communicate with parents, so we did a survey with parents, explained the reasoning, etc. Interestingly, we thought we'd get really strong support. [However] it was a bit mixed, the support we got for it. We did share the survey, and we still went ahead anyway. We said, Okay, this is what we're doing, here's why we're doing this, and we just went for it. We think there's benefits to it, here are ways to get around your concerns. We'll trial it and get more survey feedback. It's actually going pretty well. (Principal, regional secondary college, NSW)

Surveys are a powerful way of ensuring that all members of the school community can have their voice included in any information gathering. The results can provide a snapshot at a point in time, shining a light on practices, and helping to highlight strengths to build on and areas for improvement. Conducting surveys on a regular basis, e.g. once or twice per year, can also help track trends and impacts of actions taken. Questions can be tailored for different target audiences, such as school staff or parents and families (ARACY, 2020).

Many schools indicated that their respective Diocesan Catholic Education authority mandated annual surveys of families, students and staff. What was not as clear is how schools made effective use of this annual opportunity to use the feedback from stakeholders. There may be a disconnect between harnessing the family's keenness to be heard, openly inviting their participation in a time-effective method and actually using that data to inform improvements at a local school level.

Families provide continuity in school communities with many remaining members of that community for the long-term, whereas staff may move between schools. Maintaining open communication and involving families in decision-making processes can help sustain a positive school culture even through staff transitions.

Several principals named strategies they used in their first year in a school to invite families to meet with them and to give them the opportunity to voice suggestions, concerns and to name areas they were interested to hear more about at a future gathering. These strategies, the *Town Hall meeting* and *Conversations with Sally* are described in the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools: Have you been paying attention** (refer Addendum 1). Both principals have continued these strategies beyond their first year, taking on specific issues which included the amalgamation of three campuses in one community. One of those principals expanded on her thinking:

I strongly believe that when parents feel that they have a voice, and they actually have some agency in the school, that the outcomes that we are looking for are the best for our students.

Research into what that means for parents to feel that they are part of the journey is critical for parents and that their agency counts. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Qld)

Schools face the challenge of capturing and addressing the many happenings and concerns from families in a day. There is evidence of many opportunities for families to provide input through formal channels like the Parents and Friends Association, School Boards and other variations of Parent/Family Engagement Groups as well as informal groups centred around specific interests like sports teams, music groups, or fundraising events. Committing to authentic ways of gathering constructive criticism, affirmations, and suggestions for improvement can be instrumental in shaping how schools work with families. The mindset needed to accept and embrace feedback is well illustrated by this principal:

You need to know where you're going to get honest feedback from and visit that place often, but not regularly. You get some quality feedback from parents, and sometimes it can be brutal, but it's what you need to know. So being open, but also being accessible. I guess the most important thing is being open to feedback, because it's very easy to take a defensive position. (Principal, Regional secondary college, Tasmania).

From the **Toolbox of actions which work in schools: Have you been paying attention** (refer Addendum 1), describes actions taken by school communities to encourage parent voice and reciprocate with a mindset for listening and responding to their community.

By implementing these strategies, schools have been able to create a climate that fosters meaningful family engagement, leading to improved student outcomes, stronger school-community connections, and a more supportive learning environment for all. A culture that genuinely values parent perspectives, provides ample communication channels, and creates a welcoming environment is key to fostering productive family engagement in schools.

If we don't have strong relationships, then I believe straight away we fail the children who are at our school. (Principal, rural primary school)

6. School - Family Partnerships

6.1 Partners not clients

There are no clients in a school which authentically sets out to work with families - there are partners. The central point of agreement by all stakeholder groups in this study was the importance of a partnership between the school and families. Partnering with families is viewed as foundational for fostering an inclusive school community and providing the best possible support for each child's holistic development.

As one principal explained:

Because they're part of our school, the kids just don't come here, it's a package deal. Making sure that we have the family involved in what we do is really important. I stress to them that we work in a three-way partnership at our school. It's the parent, the teacher, and the child. (Principal, rural primary school, Qld)

Teachers recognize the importance of forming strong partnerships with families for effective student learning and growth, often referring to the team approach that schools take in working with families:

As a teacher, to have effective communication with the parents of the students you teach, because we're a team, it's not just about the students. And it's not just about a teacher, it's about everyone involved in that student's life coming together to support them and create an experience where they can flourish. (Teacher, rural R – 12 College, SA)

Families appreciate schools that foster an open and welcoming culture for communication. They want to feel comfortable asking questions, raising concerns, and being involved in their child's education journey. Being part of a true partnership about their child, is the ideal position to be in for a parent:

To me, education is a partnership, like we are the primary educators. So, anything that's happening at home, if we're going to work as a team, we need to work together. So that requires strong communication back and forth. Whether it's with neurodiversity, or learning difficulties, or just helping to support the teachers or the curriculum, you know, reinforcing stuff at home, that's happening at school, we need to know what they're learning and more how they're learning, or help provide feedback the other way, how my child learns best. (Parent, metro primary school, Qld)

Developing trust and personal connections with families is vital, especially when addressing sensitive issues or negotiating challenges related to a child's needs, highlighting the importance of having a robust partnership:

It helps us be better at our work. I always say to new parents, nobody will know your child as well as you do, and we're in this work together with your child. There'll be times where, despite our best efforts, we'll miss the mark, or we may miss each other in communication. Your role as the parent at that moment, is to contact us and talk to us about that. Communication at that level, that's home and school working together. (Principal, Metropolitan R – 12 College, SA).

6.2 The power of three

Many schools use the triangle metaphor to highlight for families the preferred partnership with them:

I've called it the essential triangle between the student, the teacher and the parents. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Qld)

Because we don't educate in isolation. It's a triangle of connections, school, parents and family, and students. And we have to be interrelated to each other, we have to be connecting, because we go this journey together, you can't educate in isolation. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Kiddie (2020) has used the metaphor of the Rule of Threes to link to the power of a strong partnership between parent, teacher and student:

The Rule of Threes, encapsulated in the Borromean rings, where each ring supports the other two, is a fitting metaphor for the power of relationships, and the concept of a triangle, the strongest geometric form is worth a little biomimicry - in a figurative way.

When families are appreciated for the value of their insights and experience with their children, and teachers invite families in as partners, then students are likely to show greater commitment to their learning. When describing their approach to engaging with families, one principal was very clear about where the focus lay, especially during the enrolment process. Enrolments in this setting are with the whole family, one-on-one, sometimes with an interpreter, to understand their backgrounds, languages spoken at home, and what they are looking for in a school for their child.

We talk families here. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Another perspective from a teacher:

You might have Johnny in our class, but really, we've got Johnny and his mum, stepdad, and his half-brother with other siblings. We need to realise that it's not just knowing the 30 kids you've got in your class, it's 90 relationships you've got between all the parents and the children. (Teacher, regional primary school, WA)

In one school, the triangle metaphor has been taken to a whole new level, in what is described as **Learning by the Power of 3**. The principal reflected on the process that led to this approach:

There was not a connection to families. While there were pockets of things that were being done in support of families, they would be done in a kind of old, traditional sort of missionary way. It wasn't about building capacity; it wasn't about doing things from a relationship of equity. One of the biggest achievements was to flip our staff to have a much more open mindset, and they are now far more of that view of partnership with families: we do with, we listen, we engage, and we

respond, and it was very upfront about every kid, every family. That's who we're going after. Inherent to that approach was the development of learning by the power of three. (Principal, metro primary school, Victoria).

Learning by the Power of 3 model aims to shift the school's mindset to be more open-minded, engage in partnership with families, and recognize that families hold invaluable knowledge about their children that the school needs to learn from and incorporate. In essence, *Learning by the Power of 3* was a strategic initiative to build an education approach centred on three equal partners - the school, families, and students - learning from and with each other for the holistic development of the child.

6.3 Shared language of learning

The power of conversation is a common theme, highlighting the importance of establishing a common language around learning to facilitate effective communication between schools, teachers, and families. This is especially so for families who are experiencing school for the first time as a parent, making the transition from a primary to secondary school setting and acutely so for families joining an Australian school community from a very different culture.

I believe that consistency and that shared language, a shared understanding for children is very important, especially in secondary school, when children are starting to kind of push away from parents. Schools can sometimes pick up on things parents aren't aware of, and they're finding that that partnership really helps to hold children and adolescents in a much more holistic way. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

The overall goal is to create a shared understanding of the learning process and build trust between schools and families by making the "language of learning" clear and inclusive for all. Actions to address the "language of learning" challenge are suggested in the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools: Make it About Learning** (refer Addendum 1).

7. Making it happen - if not us, then who?

7.1 What do principals really do - the key role of the principal

School principals and leadership teams play a crucial role in building strong school-home partnerships with families modelled by their own actions and the narrative they establish and encourage for their community. Barr and Saltmarsh (2014, p491) note the importance of the school principal being identified as key in fostering positive parent-school relationships. If the principal is perceived by parents as 'dismissive or disinterested in supporting their involvement' then they will be less inclined to engage with the school. School leaders who understand and are committed to engaging with families model a number of practices which demonstrate how effective communication provides the platform for developing strong school-parent partnerships.

7.24 Setting the tone and expectations for school - family communication

The principal's leadership shapes the overall culture of openness, inclusivity and approachability towards families.

I believe it starts with the principal, just wanting to be helpful, wanting the best for the kids and you can see that filter down to the other staff, the principal's mindset, being positive. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)

You've got to have a laugh and a bit of a joke and find the funny side of things. But you know, when you talk serious talk about the education of kids, they've got to trust us. (Principal, metro primary school, WA)

7.24 Being visible and accessible to parents

Principals who are present, know students' names, and make themselves available to parents foster a sense of community and trust.

I pride myself in knowing people's names, so this thing being present at the school, not locking myself in my room and praying to God, nothing happens during the day. Parents appreciate that ... being visible. (Principal, rural primary school, Qld).

I think it's really important for the principal to have a presence in school, particularly a school size of one that my three boys are enrolled in. (Parent, metro secondary college, Qld)

7.24 Demonstrating a genuine investment in each student

When principals show they care about and are interested in each child, it helps build relationships with parents and engenders reassurance and trust among families:

When I have that conversation with the community, it's to reassure parents that we understand that childhood has all sorts of ups and downs, and that learning is messy, that sometimes there are tantrums and meltdowns. Adolescence has tons of good judgement and also not so good judgement and everything in between. Families continually need that reassurance that they're okay, as a family, their child's okay, and we're okay together but our journey together might look a bit different to their friends and their child or even to other siblings. I really acknowledged having four children my own, that that's indeed our experience. (Principal, metro R – 12 college, SA)

7.24 Enabling parent voice in decision-making

Effective principals create formal and informal mechanisms for families to provide input and have a voice in matters concerning their children's education.

The principal makes it very open from the get-go that she can be contacted to discuss anything. She was just a very warm, very friendly person. She gave me her mobile number straight up and just said, here's my number. Any questions, give me a call, send me a text. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)

7.24 Modelling the importance of parent-teacher partnerships

Principals reinforce the message that families are key stakeholders whose involvement and collaboration with teachers is essential for student success and provide some guidance about how that can happen.

There's been a strong focus on building those positive partnerships with the parents over time. What's worked as well is setting those boundaries that we're not necessarily going to be able to respond immediately, but we will respond. They will raise things if they're concerned or they have a question or if they're not happy about something, but they do it in a really respectful manner. Then they appreciate a response even if it's not what they want to hear and then they move on. It's been important to explain the why and parents have been pretty open about it. (Principal, regional primary school, NSW).

7.24 Ensuring consistent communication practices.

Principals institute clear protocols and expectations around how teachers communicate with families to maintain transparency and build trust. Consistency of messaging and process is a common theme taken up by many stakeholders, emphasising that having clear and direct lines of communication, where it is evident where information is coming from and who is responsible for different types of communication, is essential for consistency and avoiding confusion.

Consistency is important, I often talk to teachers about having clear lines of sight in your communication, in terms of where that information is coming from and where it needs to go. If it's not a logical line of sight in terms of your communication channels, it blurs that message and it becomes quite problematic when parents don't get the right information. (Pastoral leader, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Principals take a lead role in ensuring that any outward-facing communication, whether emails, announcements, or other messaging, should clearly tie back to and reinforce the core values, ethos, and purpose of the school. This helps ensure authenticity and alignment in the school's

communications, preventing a disconnect between what is being said externally and the actual mission driving the school internally.

People quickly see through communication that's not authentic stuff, that's just been packaged up. Communication first begins with understanding mission and making sure that the staff understand why we are here. Communication has to be authentic in keeping with growing a good culture ... that has to be first ground. That's a challenge. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Principals set the foundation for positive school-family partnerships through their leadership, visibility, personal investment in students, facilitation of parent voice, messaging, and implementation of effective communication systems.

7.2 When things are alive, they hum - the key role of the teacher

The interviews suggest that beyond just conveying information, the best teacher-family communication focuses on developing an open, trustful partnership. Good teachers are proactive, set clear protocols, make families feel valued, and treat them as partners in the child's education journey.

The ARACY (2024, p2) exploration of parent responses to the CSPA Parent Perspectives on Student Wellbeing and Learning Survey 2022 concluded:

For most parents, a working relationship with their child's teacher/s is where the focus of communication sits and is often the area most identified as needing strengthening.

The conversations in this study highlight several important roles teachers play in building effective partnerships with families:

7.21 Initiating and maintaining open communication

Teachers are expected to proactively communicate with families through various channels like emails, phone calls, meetings, and messaging apps to keep them informed and involved.

As a teacher I'm trying to provide ways for parents to support their kids to support the learning. (Teacher, metro primary school, NSW)

For families, there is a reality that:

Good communication between parents and teachers is only good if there is a relationship built with the teacher. If the teacher is not available, welcoming and friendly, then the parent such as me will not feel comfortable to speak to the teacher. (Parent, metro R – 12 College, SA)

7.22 Building personal connections and trust

Developing positive one-on-one relationships with parents and getting to know them personally helps build trust and a sense of partnership. A recurring theme is that families want to hear from the teacher first:

If there is an issue with my child, I want to hear it from the teacher first, not the leadership or the pastoral coordinator. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Each of my children is an individual with individual needs. So, the communication I like to be individualized. I'm more of a fan of when communication comes specifically from teachers directly, as opposed to perhaps the school as a whole. I definitely prefer when I hear from individual teachers. (Parent, metro R – 12 College, SA).

Teachers too are empowered if the school communication protocol places the classroom teacher as the first point of contact, which in this school has made a positive difference in fostering open communication and addressing student needs promptly at their school:

Teachers have to be on the frontline of communication. I think if there is a need, then first contact should always be by phone and that the classroom teacher needs to be the one that makes that contact as a starting point. If at any point they require support, the Year level leader would step in

and assist with that. But ultimately, it's you've got it, you have to think about what's the outcome that we want here. (Teacher, regional R – 12 College, SA)

7.23 Demonstrating care for the whole child

Teachers who show concern for child's overall wellbeing, not just academic, tend to cultivate stronger bonds with parents.

An effective teacher for me knows the students and their families; has built a relationship with the family; has a strong family connection, comes with information and has an action plan, has listened also to parent suggestions and followed up with feedback to parents. (Parent, regional primary school, NSW)

7.24 Collaborating on strategies to support struggling students

Teachers work closely with parents to develop personalized plans and share strategies when students face learning, behavioural or engagement challenges.

Right from the start, we look to establishing connections with the family (of a disengaged student). You know, stuff happens, people are people, and we all manage and deal with things differently. So, my role is to build those connections. I will sit there in the moment, and I'll explain that my role is to support you. That's my job. I can support you out of the classroom with this stuff going on at home. (Counsellor, Care school, Metro WA)

7.25 Being approachable and non-judgmental.

An open mindset that makes parents feel comfortable to ask questions and voice concerns without fear of reprisal facilitates partnership.

It's just having that open conversation and like welcoming it as well and not being judgmental. (Teacher, metro primary school, NSW)

I think what the teacher shows, is a genuine care there. I think it makes it a lot easier to do for parents to hear something that might be a bit challenging when the teacher cares about their child more than anything else. (Principal, regional secondary college, WA)

Teachers play an indispensable role in school-family partnerships through their consistent communication, relationship-building efforts, student-focused approach, collaborative spirit, approachability and guidance to new colleagues. For some, there is a heavy responsibility, almost another layer of responsibility:

It's OK to be vulnerable, to admit mistakes; you don't have to be the expert; you can apologise if you get things wrong or don't understand at first. (Teacher, metropolitan R – 12 college, SA)

While teachers play a vital role as the primary point of contact for families, principals are responsible for setting the tone and culture of open communication and trust with families. Weinzaphel (2022, p 24) believes that parents will simply disengage from schools if they are not invited into and supported in the school-family partnership.

The responsibility for preventing this disengagement lies with us and our ability to close the communication loop.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools:** the **Staff "How to" kit** (refer Addendum 1), describes actions taken by school communities to build the capacity of their staff to communicate effectively.

8. Communication that finds your families: knowing the key needs families have from school communication?

One of the challenges for families is negotiating through volumes of information, often coming through on a range of platforms and from multiple people at the school. This parent expresses the frustration experienced by many parents, suggesting that the communication should find the family rather than family having to find the communication:

It's there, but you've just got to find it. You've got to take the time to look for it. Definitely, it's having information finding them, it's not (parents) searching for it. (Parent, regional primary school, NSW)

Many principals talked about the challenge of “hitting the mark” of being able to provide clear, consistent channels of communication:

Communication is both our friend and our foe The challenge for schools at the moment, is having to both embrace all the levels of technology, but also get to a point where it's not haphazard, but there's a good comms package, and clarity around how we communicate. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Parents expressed their hope that they wouldn't have to struggle to find information or to give information to the school, some citing the inability to communicate directly with teachers:

There's definitely a vibe to "leave our teachers alone to do their work". Everything funnels through this office email. In my experience, the time it takes to get something dealt with, it's not quick. (Parent, metro primary school, Qld)

They want to try to get that information out to parents in the best possible way. Finding that magic bullet, how do you find that magic way that interacts and gets the answers that the parents need, without going through three or four different channels or bothering someone at school. (Parent, regional P – 12 College, Qld)

Principals recognize the constant challenge of finding the most effective ways to communicate with families and explore ways to be flexible and adapt communication strategies over time as family' needs change. Managing communication through too many channels can be overwhelming for families and staff and often leads schools to find ways to streamline communication while still reaching all parents effectively.

Comments by principals point to that sense that finding the “magic bullet” is a constant challenge for schools:

We are trying to understand what works best, constantly asking ourselves questions, was that effective communication? How could it be better? We're asking parents, that sort of thing as well. (Principal, regional secondary college, Qld)

The task of engaging every family is ambitious to say the very least, making this goal a significant challenge that requires a multifaceted approach. A consistent thread emerging from this study is the conversation about what families identify as their key needs in communication. These include:

8.1 Accessibility

Schools have moved to using centralized digital platforms like Compass, Canvas, and School Box, (and several others) to streamline communication and provide families with easy access to information, particularly for those whose access to communication is limited:

Our classroom teachers generally wouldn't necessarily see some of our parents apart from once or twice a year. Many of them work like that. They may live in the valley, but they might work in the city, or we've got quite a number of people working with the local shelling companies. So, they'll be on a five on, five off, seven on, the seven off rotation. If we're not using our electronic communication, then communication just won't happen. (Principal, rural primary school, Tasmania)

For this parent who works in a remote area, accessibility to school communications is important to maintain this connection to the school community:

I do fly in fly out. I go to work for two weeks, and then I'm home for two weeks. I'm sitting here right now at a power station in the middle of the desert. That's where I normally work, and I want to stay in touch. (Parent, regional primary school, WA)

Families prefer these centralized systems on platforms that are simple, user-friendly, and easily accessible on mobile devices since most parents now use smartphones.

I think if you have too many different avenues, it just gets too confusing. It just gets too much. I find Digital, like the Compass app, everything's on there. The messages come from the teachers, if it's to go to the class, everything just goes through it. If you've got too many portals, it just gets too confusing. I prefer just the one. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)



Lee Roy Myers Middle School, Title 1 Family engagement

However, schools have also been mindful that not all families are tech-savvy or have access to digital platforms. Some may still prefer hardcopy information or face-to-face interactions, or in this case, texting information:

Texting is the simplest, easiest way that we possibly can for our parents. We don't bombard them with communication. Our parents just don't have the capacity, the child doesn't have the capacity to take it home and make sure it gets to the parents. We don't tend to have professional parents that would be constantly in an email world. Our parents are probably not in that kind of space. (Principal, metropolitan CARE school, WA)

Access to digital communication bridges the distance gap for parents who are remote workers or living in rural/regional areas far from the school. It enables schools to share important information, celebrate student achievements, address concerns, and maintain that vital home-school partnership despite the geographical separation.

8.2 Clear communication pathways and protocols

Families want clarity about who to contact for different issues and a defined process for escalating concerns. They need to know the proper channels to use when communicating about their child. Several conversations highlighted the importance of having explicit procedures outlining who should communicate what and when:

Having those systems in place ... makes a big difference. It's something that works really well here and is very explicit. With the number of things that happen, we need to know each person's responsibility, what they need to do or shouldn't do. (Teacher, regional R – 12 college, SA)

Having clear communication protocols helps manage expectations, ensure timely responses, and avoid misunderstandings between schools and families. One principal stated that developing a protocol around communication was important to give clarity to families about the communication process:

It spells out this is what we do, when we do it and the way we do it. (Principal, metro R – 12 College, SA)

Many schools provide a flowchart protocol which outlines who families should contact for different concerns, aiming to provide timely responses and avoid unnecessary delays. Having communication pathways and protocols is important as is providing parents with the information needed to access the school communication systems:

We provide new parents with information on the various communication platforms used by the school like Seesaw and SIMON, so they understand how to engage. We explain this is the way we do communication here. If you're not sure about something, there are these QR codes where you can go and find out. (Principal, outer metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

While challenging to achieve at times, having explicit guidelines on communication channels, designated contact points for families, and carefully navigating sensitive topics - all in service of clear, open communication pathways between schools and families is critical to building confidence in the way the school interacts with families.

8.3 Personalised and contextualised information

It is a common reflection by schools that despite putting out volumes of information in a range of platforms, many families do not seem to be aware of the communication. Generic mass communications are less effective. Families appreciate personalized messages that provide context specific to their child's needs, progress, and situation.

Each of my children are individuals with individual needs. The communication I like to be individualised. I'm more of a fan of when communication comes specifically from teachers directly, as opposed to perhaps the school. It's harder as a parent of many to decipher what's relevant for my child. I like really clear specific individual information from teachers particularly within the secondary, having a home room teacher so you've always got that first port of call that can then send that information to where it needs to go. (Parent, metropolitan R – 12 college, SA)

This principal shared an example of personalized communication with families, where teachers made phone calls to introduce themselves and check in on families, describing the positive response from families, with many appreciating the personal contact and feeling more connected to the school:

I think it's the one-on-one communication that the school does very well, that our staff do very well, just personalising that communication. (Principal, regional R – 12 college, SA).

8.4 Timely and consistent communication

Many parents spoke about how essential it was to their family organisation to have a regular, timely communication about what was happening in the coming week:

It is important for my daily life, which then affects my kids' daily life. The more prepared I am, the more prepared my kids will be for school. (Parent metro secondary college, WA)

It's important, so families can plan their busy lifestyles, they're going to be able to plan their lives around what they can do. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, WA)

Families need regular, up-to-date communication from the school and their child's teachers. Consistency in communication frequency helps build trust and ensures families don't miss important information.

We look for consistency, and accuracy, it needs to be accurate, and it needs to be in a timely fashion. It's basically timely communication, and there's no lag. That's what I think is really important in communicating with school parents and students as well. So, there's no lag time between when the students are told to when we're told. (Parent, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

Many teachers recognise the value of timely reminders about the week ahead and how families can support their child's learning:

I started sending out an email every week, just with a breakdown of what we were learning and what (parents) could do at home. I got a good response to that. I felt like I was doing a better job by sending that weekly outline for parents. (Teacher, rural primary school, NSW)

Sending weekly email updates to families about classroom activities, upcoming events, and important information is a common practice among teachers as a way to keep families informed and involved in their child's education.

Many acknowledge that the domino effect of supporting families with a timely flow of information, encouragement and invitations to connect is that these practices build confidence about the school among families:

I know that giving the weekly update instils confidence in the parents, and the ability of the school to deal with issues. It's very important that it's all about confidence. Giving parents confidence, not just in education, but every other aspect of the student's life. When the school is organized, it gives parents confidence and builds trust. (Parent, primary school, ACT)

8.5 Streamlined communication

Busy families, particularly with children in multiple schools, in multi-campus schools or large and complex schools are looking for more streamlined communication to avoid information overload.

What it comes down to ensuring that teachers in their communication are really clear. Keeping it short, sharp and simple, doesn't need to be complicated. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Schools have responded to parent feedback around addressing the abundance of communications, as this principal explains:

We're now trying to be very strategic with our communications. We streamlined it a little bit last year, because there were lots of different avenues for people to communicate. By cutting out a few of the extra bits and pieces, it's helped everyone to understand better the purpose for particular communications. (Principal, regional primary school, NSW)

Schools are trying to cut down on multiple communication channels and clarify the purpose of each method to reduce confusion. There is a desire to move away from teachers, departments, and leadership all sending separate communications, and instead have more centralized one-way communication. The conundrum that many schools entertain is providing "too much or too little" communication which is often resolved by sending information by every possible mode as this principal suggests:

The other thing I think would be the old adage of try as many ways as you can to communicate something. Don't just send an email, send something else, put it out there on Facebook. You've got to try and find where the parents are at. (Principal, Regional secondary college, Qld)

There is strong desire to streamlining the flow of information as a way to make that communication more timely, focused and efficient amidst concerns about information overload in today's digital age.

8.6 Two-Way traffic

Families are looking to provide feedback, voice concerns and be part of decision-making. The provision of effective ways to listen to and capture parent voice through surveys, forums, parent

representatives and the like are essential. This parent values the "open two-way communication" that allows them to both receive updates from the school and initiate contact with teachers as needed.

As a parent, I'm able to log in to the parent access interface and have a look at how my child's tracking I can contact teachers, there's open two-way communication. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Victoria)

That's the one thing I found really great about this particular school is feedback given to the principal is taken on board. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, NSW)

8.7 Clear boundaries and reasonable expectations

While valuing open communication, teachers also want schools to set reasonable boundaries, such as limiting non-urgent communication outside school hours. Both families and school staff benefit from having defined protocols, accommodations for diversity, and mutual understanding of appropriate boundaries between homes and schools.

I think that what we do at home complements what's happening at school, which makes managing expectations between the two of you another reason for communicating as a team. (Parent, metro primary school, Qld)

There are families who suggest that schools need to reset expectations around family-school communication when students move to higher grade levels, putting more onus on the students themselves to take responsibility and initiative:

I think there's an expectation management piece that needs to happen because it is very different from primary school to high school. When they're in primary school, the relationship and the communication is very reliant on a teacher providing the information because the story that you get from the child is not always reliable. As they get older, the information reporting is more reliable, but it becomes discretionary. I think, at each stage of student's life with their school, the relationship that the parent has with their child changes and the mode and delivery also needs to adapt to that. But the communication is still critical. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Victoria)

Families value clarity from schools on communication protocols and expectations, as it allows a gradual release of responsibility to their children as they mature, preparing them for greater independence in tertiary education and beyond.

The narrative from schools is about priority being given to listening to families about what works best for them. An appreciation of busy lifestyles, the diverse demographics around families and even an understanding of the current financial stresses experienced by families all have an impact on the way schools and families communicate with each other.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools: News headlines – not the 6 o'clock news** (refer Addendum 1) describes actions taken by school communities to provide essential up-to-date news in a quick accessible format

9. Multiple channels of communication

Some principals referenced the work of US researcher George Otero who has visited Australia to speak with school leaders, including several who were part of this study. Otero has spent a lifetime working to promote the power of positive relationships in teaching and learning in partnerships with families. He encouraged schools to utilize multiple communication channels (five or more) to effectively reach and engage families. The idea is that providing diverse communication platforms increases the likelihood of connecting with families, rather than expecting families to solely seek out information from the school. This approach has been embraced by most schools with this principal explaining the rationale:

I go with the rule of thumb, that you need to communicate in five different ways all the time with parents, not assume that our preferred way of communication is the audience's preferred. In

managing people's anxiety, a great way to lessen anxiety is good communication with calm language, so trying to stand in the shoes of the audience, and then making sure that the school is not appearing arrogant or just setting up this one platform and your job is to follow the platform. (Principal, metro primary school, Victoria).

Most schools have adopted multiple channels for families in the belief that having options will suit the diverse range of families in most schools, this strategy of communication making more likely that the communication from the school will find families. While multiple channels provide flexibility, having too many options without clear guidelines can overwhelm families and make effective communication harder for schools. Striking the right balance and setting expectations is pivotal to the success or otherwise of building family engagement.

The need for schools to utilize multiple channels of communication with families is mentioned in several of the conversations:

We need to have multiple different layers of communication between parents the school. one mode is not reliable. (Parent, primary school, ACT)

Providing multiple modes of communication does place an obligation on the school to suitably prepare families by ensuring that information explaining the different channels is accessible to families, as suggested by this senior leader:

We provide help for parents to understand IT. Our IT department is amazing. Even if parents can't find what they need on a device, we say come in with your device and we'll help you to figure out those issues. We want the information to be easily accessible, and always a positive experience in that we can resolve any issue, we can fix things, whatever you need, as long as you talk to us, we can work with that. (Leadership team member, regional secondary college, NSW)

There are numerous channels of communication available to schools which cater to different family preferences. While principals are reminded constantly that families want open, consistent communication that keeps them informed and invested as partners in their child's educational journey, the challenges in getting the right mix for diverse family groups is ever present:

There's been this growth of channels of communication and what platforms people are using. That's both an opportunity and a challenge around getting that right, what are you going to use? Those lines of communication have really been a tipping point around schools as we're constantly asking "what communication do parents actually want? Where does that sit? Is that just around the general happenings of the school? Is it around communication points from the principal? Or is it around the glossy stuff that sits around advertising? We're asking ourselves "what's your communication message"? (Principal, Metro Secondary College, Qld.)

Based on the interviews, several modes and channels of communication seem to work well for families, reflecting the use of traditional modes of communication such as newsletters and non-traditional modes made available by digital technologies. The most common channels of communication include:

9.1 Email and newsletters

People generally view email correspondence as an important communication channel between schools and families, although its effectiveness can vary. Email is seen as a vital way for families to receive updates and information from schools, especially when face-to-face interaction is limited as was the case during COVID-19 when there was a heavier reliance on email correspondence to stay informed.

While email is still a widely used communication method, there seems to be a shift towards preferring briefer, more direct updates through channels like texts, apps and social media over long emails and newsletters. Striking the right balance in terms of content and frequency appears to be key for effective email communication with families.

Newsletters have had centre-stage as the key form of communication with families. However, many schools have questioned the value of newsletters, at least in their traditional form, as the key mode of communication with the school community. With the advent of the metrics available from digital newsletter platforms around readership / hits, there has been growing concern about the effectiveness of traditional newsletters for communication of key school messages.

Despite the more recent tracking of data highlighting the declining readership of newsletters, they still have a place albeit with many modifications. Here are some typical comments about the newsletter:

Regardless of the fact (that many people open but don't read the newsletter), we back the newsletter. It's important to me as I think it's a shopfront, particularly a shopfront for future parents who want to jump on a website and say how do they communicate? What do they celebrate what matters to them? (Principal, regional P – 12 college, Qld.)

The newsletter is where I would go for things like cross country, getting a timetable of what's coming up, all the sports things, things that are a bit more forward looking in terms of timeframes and that's the newsletter. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Newsletters are seen as still having a place in some families' minds and most schools continue to use them, although with local modifications which include:

- A short weekly bulletin with the practical things to stay organised
- The weekly one pager, supplemented by other communications, including channels like the school website, text messages, social media, and video recordings
- A weekly bulletin that tells families what's happening in the school and what they need for the week: short, sharp dot points of weekly touchstones
- One weekly newsletter with everything families have requested in it
- A weekly message under several headings, a snapshot with short paragraphs

What is clear is that schools are publishing newsletters less frequently and many include:

- Capacity to be read on a hand-held device
- Inclusive of links to other more detailed communication.
- Being published at an exact time and day of the week
- And, in some schools, is still available in hard copy

While newsletters are still utilized, many schools recognize their declining importance for some parents and aim to provide information through multiple digital channels to meet the diverse communication needs of families.

9.2 Parent portals and Learning Management Systems (LMS)

All schools involved in this study utilise a Parent Portal App and increasingly a Learning Management System (LMS). The practice in almost all schools was to use the familiar name of the digital platform including Simon, Compass and School Box. There is some distinction between a Parent Portal and a full Learning Management System (LMS), though they are often used together. A Parent Portal refers specifically to the component of an LMS that allows families to access information about their child's progress, assignments, grades, attendance, etc. It's essentially the parent-facing part of the LMS.

Some key points about Parent Portals:

- They provide a centralized place for families to view their child's academic data, upcoming events/assignments, and communicate with teachers
- Schools often use specific Parent Portal platforms like Compass, Schoolbox, or Simon and the particular platform used is commonly used across all systemic catholic schools in a particular diocese
- Parent Portals allow schools to push out updates, newsletters, permission slips directly to parents

A Learning Management System (LMS) is a more comprehensive digital platform that integrates tools for instruction, assessment, communication, and data management. An LMS encompasses the Parent Portal but also includes components for:

- Teachers to distribute assignments, lessons, resources
- Housing student work, grades, feedback to support continuous and summative reporting processes in one place
- Enabling communication between teachers, students, families
- Integrating with a school's other systems like attendance, and scheduling of interviews.

While neither is the complete one-stop-shop for communication between schools and families, each represents a significant step towards empowering contemporary personalised learning and engagement.

Many families find parent portals and apps like Compass, Canvas and Simon very useful for accessing information about their child's progress, attendance, assignments, and communicating with teachers.

Compass has been good. I get notifications as well if something is put on Compass, so that helps to jog my memory to go and have a look. (Parent regional primary school, NSW)

I love this App, because I can just log on to Simon everywhere and know what's going on with the calendar. You can see everything, particularly what's going into the classroom. (Parent, regional primary school, Victoria)

Seesaw and Classroom Dojo are apps commonly used in pre-school and primary school settings to facilitate communication and sharing of information between teachers and families. Of the two, Seesaw is more widely used in primary schools as a communication and portfolio app to share students' work, updates and messages between teachers and parents.

Teachers report using Seesaw to send daily snapshots and photos of student's learning activities:

In my classroom, I use Seesaw. I try to let parents know in advance of any changes to the routine, like if we're coming over to assembly. I try to do that as a whole blanket thing for the whole class about events. And then I'm trying to communicate the children's individual progress, and I will take photos of their work because they're pre -prep and parents love that. (Teacher, regional primary school, WA)

This principal shared the impact of using Seesaw during the pandemic to both enable better communication with families and shift the staff culture which exhibited a disconnect with families:

It wasn't in the culture of the staff, bringing the voice of the child, the child agency into the classroom. We made it very clear that we needed to communicate with the parent cohort, and it was COVID-19 that gave some impetus. We rapidly moved to a platform called Seesaw, which enabled a direct messaging chat, which was very helpful and that pushed the communication up. (Principal, regional primary school, WA)

Families found apps like Compass and Canvas/Simon useful for receiving updates, accessing student information, and communicating with teachers, but some preferred consolidating everything into one app for convenience. This family was mindful of not presuming that every family was ready for embracing new technologies:

There's a little bit of implied or kind of assumed knowledge that things are genuinely intuitive, and that most people have a smartphone and can use it access these Apps. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Victoria)

9.3 Text messaging

Text messaging is widely used by many schools as an effective form of communication with families. Some of the best practices for schools to effectively utilize text messaging as a communication channel include:

- Text messaging is ideal for conveying important, time-sensitive information like:
 - Event cancellations or schedule changes
 - Reminders about deadlines, uniform requirements, etc.
 - Absence notifications
- Concise and direct messaging that are straight to the point without overloading with too much information. Use of texts for brief, need-to-know updates such as:
 - Late arrival of a bus back from a school event
 - A weather alert
 - Lockdown activated by emergency services or police.
- Integrated with other channels such as:
 - Emails for detailed information
 - Social media for general updates
 - Communication apps/portals for two-way messaging
- Personal and targeted:
 - Provide the option for families to directly message specific teachers/staff about their child via text.
 - Additionally, use opt-in groups to send targeted grade-level or activity updates.
- Timely notifications, reminding families:
 - That booking for school events were closing.
 - Reminders to book online for parent-teacher conversations.
 - An impending student-free day.

In terms of distinguishing between modes of communication used for gaining family attention, the view of one principal is that:

There's a level of prioritisation. If a text message comes, it's more urgent, and it's critical time sensitive information that you need to see right now. If it comes in an email, it's less urgent but still important. If it comes in both, then it's probably indicating that it's lots of information, but you need to look at it now. So, there's lots of differentiation. (Principal, Regional primary school, Qld.)

9.4 Social media

While most schools have embraced the use of social media to enhance parent engagement, schools have generally taken a cautious approach, mindful of the possible risks associated with using social media including:

- relying too heavily on it for critical information.
- social media being seen as the primary channel for conveying important information
- that social media doesn't necessarily surface the most important or accurate information.
- overwhelming families with too much information.
- the demographic differences in social media usage among families.
- the possibility of negative messages infiltrating the school communication.

The cautionary note is taken up by several principals:

I think that everybody's interested in a quick fix digital platform. We're in a phase of transition. But I can see that it's gathering momentum moving away from it (traditional forms of communication). However, I don't want to just omit that, because I'm not sure that we have sufficient capacity within social media to have that ongoing relationship with parents. We can tell them what's on next week. But the how and why is missing from that. We need to keep that those connections. (Principal regional secondary college, NSW)

Principals have generally recognised that families are very active on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram and there are numerous opportunities to leverage social media to:

- provide regular updates and reminders
- to post frequent updates on school events, important dates, policy changes, and other timely information
- share photos and celebrations, posting photos from classroom activities, student achievements, performances, etc. allows families to get a glimpse into their child's school life. Celebrating student successes builds a positive culture
- to promote special programs, extracurricular activities, fundraisers, and create awareness about the diverse offerings at the school
- To establish two-way communication while not replacing formal channels, social media allows families to comment, ask questions and receive quick responses from the school
- To provide important links and resources enabling schools to use social media to direct families to critical resources like the parent portal, website and online forms like Consent-to-go

If we have an event that parents need to RSVP for catering purposes, or we've got limited numbers, we keep that on Compass and make sure our forms and our information go out through Compass. Then we cross advertise on Facebook and draw them back to Compass to say you need to fill out the RSVP form on Compass. (Principal, metro secondary school, NSW)

- to build school brand and market to prospective families as an active, engaging social media presence showcasing the school's culture and achievements can aid in marketing efforts and attracting new enrolments.

The key is to use social media strategically - providing a window into the school, celebrating successes, and enabling two-way communication, while directing families to official channels for critical information.

One of the interesting insights around the use of social media is the parent-to-parent communication using social media apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Parent groups communicate and coordinate with each other about school-related matters, though these are typically initiated by parents themselves rather than the school. Here are some key points about parents using these messaging apps:

- Parents find WhatsApp and Messenger groups helpful for quickly sharing information, reminders, and coordinating things like volunteer signups or fundraising events.

Most of the classes have a WhatsApp group which starts early in the year with a poster up outside each classroom, the QR code for scanning in to join the group. (Parent, metro primary school, WA)

- These parent-created groups complement but are separate from official school communication channels. The groups allow parents to directly message each other about day-to-day things:

We have WhatsApp groups. It's actually just used really purposefully. You're not being bombarded with messages, just the stuff you need reminders about or to check out. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, WA)

- Schools may be hesitant to officially endorse these messaging apps due to potential legal implications, though some recognize families are using them informally anyway.

We don't have a school WhatsApp group, but I know there's a lot of that going on in terms of groups of parents around the school that have already done that themselves. (Principal, primary school, ACT)

Principals accept parent-initiated WhatsApp groups while keeping them at arm's length from the school's formal communication channels. Many acknowledge that while WhatsApp and Messenger fill a niche for convenient parent-to-parent communication, schools still rely on official channels to disseminate important information to all families.

9.5 Phone calls

Personal phone calls, especially in the beginning of the school year, help build a positive connection between families and teachers/staff. Families appreciate this direct line of communication.

Within the first four or five weeks of the year, we've just had all home room teachers make a phone call home to all parents of these new seven students and any other new students to the college. So, someone is making contact, personal contact with home to say, hey, I'm so and so I'm your child's homeroom teacher, if you're having any issues, please feel free to email me or call me here at the school. Come and see us if you have things to ask as soon as you can. That's been well received by many parents, particularly those that find it difficult to attend the college events.
(Parent, regional secondary college, NSW)

There is a consensus among principals, teachers and families who see value in using phone calls, especially for sensitive or important conversations, rather than relying solely on emails or messaging apps.

9.6 Video conferencing

The use of video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Teams has enabled greater involvement of families who were previously unable to attend in-person events due to work, distance, or other commitments. Truck drivers, boarding families, Fly in Fly out workers and rural families can now participate virtually. While video meetings cannot fully replace in-person interactions, they are becoming an integral part of school-family communication strategies post-COVID. Schools see video as an effective way to be more inclusive, accessible, and accommodating of diverse parent needs.

For families who can't easily come to the school, video conferencing tools enable them to attend meetings and parent-teacher interviews virtually. This teacher highlights the benefits for families and suggest that many of the practice's schools had to implement during COVID-19 could still be used:

Zoom means that you can actually be looking at the teacher who's working with your child. A really great example is a father who drives trucks. He was able to be involved in parent teacher student interviews, because he can pull the truck over and use his device. I know that they're amazing families who will be here if they could, whether it's farming lifestyle, or just the distance for some to come to a one or two-hour event. For them to be able to jump on to zoom has been amazing. It's good to know you can have a zoom option as well. (Teacher, regional secondary college, NSW)

9.7 In-person meetings face-to-face meetings

Face-to-face meetings with families are highly valued by schools and teachers for effective communication, particularly when engaging with families about sensitive matters.

- Face-to-face meetings allow for better understanding, clarity, and conveyance of tone compared to emails or written communication, which can be misinterpreted.
- Teachers prefer face-to-face or phone calls over emails for sensitive issues like behaviour concerns or learning difficulties, as it shows the family that their child's situation is important enough for direct personal communication
- Schools make efforts to have face-to-face meetings with families of students with disabilities or special needs to ensure everyone is on the same page regarding accommodations and support:

Face to face stuff tends to suit me quite largely. But I'm here a lot and I stay longer in the morning with my son (who is autistic). I make sure he's settled in and things like that. I will be more of a known face around school than some other parents. I think we've all made that work. (Parent, metro primary school, Tasmania).

- For indigenous families, meeting face-to-face is seen as a more culturally sensitive way engage with the school staff:

We found that for indigenous families meeting face-to-face is often a nicer way to connect for them to feel like they're part of something here. (Principal, regional primary school, Qld)

- While emails and digital communication are convenient, some feel the loss of face-to-face interactions takes away the human element of relationship building between parents and teachers.

We've tried really hard to have an open-door policy in the school. In every interview that I have with a parent, I say, we work with you and we're available. We'd like that to be as organic as possible. If a parent has a need and wants to see one of us, come into the office, usually we're available to you. That's not always convenient, but I think it sends a message to parents again, that they're important. (Principal, regional primary school, Qld)

Insights from this study suggest that digital technologies are changing the way families and schools communicate with each other and digital media contacts are often considered to be more immediate and convenient. While digital communication is convenient, many families still value face-to-face meetings with teachers to discuss their child's progress and any concerns in a more personal setting. For school staff there is also a strong realisation that face-to-face conversations are preferable to other forms of communication, albeit being mindful of the time required to meet personally.

There was a common sentiment across all schools that recognize the need to consolidate communication channels and integrate digital platforms as much as possible for a seamless experience for families. However, achieving a truly unified solution remains an ongoing challenge. Many schools spoke about their hope that in time “all these digital platforms would speak to each other”.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools: Sharing Good News** (refer Addendum 1), provides ways to share good news rather than communicating only when there is an issue.

10. So many channels of communication: it's time to be strategic

Schools that are intent on shaping communication with families in a way which will lead to family engagement are investing time and resources to meet the needs of their community:

We overdo it at times in terms of what we push out to families, but this desire of families to be much more connected into the daily experience with their children in schools is the tension we play with. (Principal, metropolitan R – 12 college, SA)

Schools navigate this tension by determining the appropriate amount and methods of sharing information and being available for conversations with families through various communication platforms.

Faced with the reality that there is currently no one communication platform that works for all families, school principals have recognised the necessity to work towards a more strategic approach to communication. This principal explains how at a community conversation involving up to 50 parents early after her appointment, the school was able to move to a more strategic approach to communication:

I got them to share with me their communication styles, the communications they valued, which communications were superfluous and what communication they wanted to change. We now have very strategic plan around communication, to ensure that parents are aware of where particular information is shared and why it is shared in that format. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Qld)

In another setting, the school recognised a need to become more intentional and strategic about communication and among other measures appointed a staff member with skills and experience in this area who described the task ahead:

The school has to really lock down what their vision is, and what they want to communicate with families with a few key goals. First up, we'll work with all these platforms that are quite ad hoc. The messages get missed, it's very reactionary, and it's like, this is here, this is there, this part over

here. What happens is that people tune out, because it's just too much communication. I'm trying to look at those platforms and think, how can we utilise those effectively and how to create some clear protocols around how those are used, rather than just bombarding parents. We want to get some key parents involved as well, across the school. (Director of digital services, regional K – 12 College, WA)

What is clear from talking with staff who work in this area is that while the goal may be to have “one point of truth”, that goal is unrealistic and does not take into account that information does, of necessity, get dispersed across multiple platforms. Achieving a true single “point of truth” is recognized as a challenge given the diverse communication needs and preferences of families, teachers, and students.

Many schools are becoming more strategic about family communication by rationalizing channels, clarifying purposes, and actively seeking family input and engagement. Some of strategic actions taken by schools include:

10.1 Asking the families about their needs and preferred ways of communication

Finding out what families want in terms of communication is crucial for schools, many of which value hearing and knowing the community's voice when setting high expectations for communication. In one school tasked with an amalgamation, the process included consulting families about school communication:

We are listening and having that consultation process, working with parents and encouraging them to give us feedback because some parents say there are too many multiple channels and that there should be one. We also have multiple campuses so that makes communication challenging, so we're having lots of conversations. We're taking that feedback back to the executive leadership team. (Head of campus, metropolitan R – 12 college, SA)

10.2 Communication channels by choice

Principals actively seek family feedback on preferred communication methods through surveys and direct conversations to continuously improve their strategies. Many schools at enrolment time outline the communication channels, making it possible for families to choose their preferred communication mode. There is potential for schools to consider a way to record which communication offered by the school they prefer and then tailor the two-way communication process around those choices.

10.3 Using the data

The systematic collection and analysis of various data sources like behaviour tracking, attendance, surveys, learning management systems, and parent forums can identify strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement in school-family communication strategies.

Many newsletter services provide useful metrics as do Learning Management systems. Using the learning management system to track family engagement levels with viewing student work and teacher feedback reveals potential communication gaps to be addressed. Anecdotally, information gathered from front office staff is also a useful way to better understand what families are looking for. Surveys, use of QR codes for feedback and analysis of website hits all provide data which can help inform the school approach to improving the effectiveness of school – home communication. This quote provides an example of how schools are using data:

For example, on the school website, we had parent focus groups, to have a look at what parents want to learn from the school's website, which information they think is important and in what order of priority. We also had a look at analytics on the old website, for example, having a look at search functions and what parents were looking for using the search tool. (Digital Technologies staff, metro secondary college, WA)

10.4 Hiring a specialist

Many schools, particularly larger schools, have employed specialist staff in areas like Communication and Marketing and Digital Technologies. For those communities that are able, there is an opportunity for schools to dedicate more resources and specialized roles to strengthening communication practices between all stakeholders:

We have a new director role in our digital learning space. One of their first bodies of work, this term we've been trying to get into a communication strategy for staff, but also for parents. (Principal, regional K – 12 college, WA)

11. Every family has a story - insights from some priority family groups

Part of the essential fabric of Australian Catholic schools is the richness of the diversity of families who choose a catholic school for their children and young people. There are many different forms of families and family life that exist in all schools as are the characteristics that differentiate them from one another. One of the objectives of this study was accessing the views of teachers, and leaders, parents, families and carers of children in such priority populations as:

- Indigenous and Torres Strait families
- Families with students who have a disability
- Families who have a child who is disengaging from school
- Families with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD)
- Families from regional, rural and remote communities including Boarding School families; and
- Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds”

During this study the researchers were reminded of two additional groups present in some school communities:

- Defence Force families, and
- Families with students identifying as LGBTQI+.

As one of the parents interviewed in this study commented:

One of the challenges, and there are many around communication in schools, is around the increasing diversity of family groups in schools. (Parent, regional primary school, WA)

While specific insights from each of these groups are included, there is one compelling belief across all of the schools visited that every family has a story and that every family should be afforded the opportunity to tell their story. No relationship, no partnership, no effective family engagement can occur without this highly respectful opportunity for families to tell their individual story.

Here are some comments which illustrate the importance of hearing family stories:

We all come to the school with a story. It's really important that we get to know each other's story, so that we can then provide every opportunity for our families. (Principal, regional primary school, WA)

One of the key considerations is being really respectful of each family and where they are, where they're coming from, and understanding what their issues are. It's a very personal conversation. (Principal, regional primary school, Tasmania)

An essential part of building relationships between schools and families is to recognize the importance of taking the time to understand the personal stories and backgrounds of all students and families in order to best meet their needs.

11.1 Indigenous and Torres Strait families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families place great importance on storytelling and oral traditions as a way to pass down cultural knowledge, histories, and values from one generation to the next.

Families have and value their own story and are more likely to trust and partner with schools if their story is known and valued:

It's important to us that the staff know our family circumstances, our story: I suppose by being informed, well informed by families, they reach out to you whether your family was in the school in the past few years or currently just reaching out to them. They keep in touch with students, and parents, that's keeping everyone involved. (First Nations Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

I think it's really important with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to be in an environment where their customs and their beliefs are upheld. And it's not this rigid, systematic approach, which is the complete opposite of aboriginal cultures. There's an emphasis on kinship connections, connections with elders. (Teacher, regional secondary college, NSW)

Schools shared some of the effective ways they engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families:

- Employing Indigenous staff members to connect with the school community, meeting face-to-face with families, sharing the local cultures with staff more generally, and suggesting specific actions to be inclusive and welcoming. Language barriers can make communication very challenging for families who don't speak English as a first language.
- Having front office staff from these communities helps build trust, facilitate communication, and provide culturally appropriate support. They can assist with developing cultural learning plans, making home visits, and acting as a bridge between families and teachers.

For me, as an Aboriginal person, it's very important to have an Aboriginal person here at the front (office) because I'm a local person. It's important because I know all the families and easier for me too, because I know who they are. It's easy for them to come to me, very open and honest because they trust you, they know who you are as the first contact. And then I just have a conversation, and they talk to me about personal stuff. And then I direct them to whoever they need to speak with. (Admin officer, regional K – 12 College, WA)

- Understanding that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may have had negative experiences with education. Meeting them with empathy, listening to their perspectives, and making the school a relaxed, non-threatening space helps to build bridges to better communication. Home visits are one way of reaching out to families who may be reluctant to come near schools:

You get to know people and your students when you go out on those engagements (home visits). It was also good that I did take a teacher out and they hadn't even been into that part of town before. (Play Group leader, remote K – 12 college, WA)

- Fostering connections within the Aboriginal community:

We've created quite a community for those families, so that they actually get to know each other and know the supports and what's around. We also joined X (the local Aboriginal corporation) who provide tutors for students and their parents. (Principal, rural primary school Tasmania)

In one school, engagement buses are one of the strategies used to reach out and connect with families who may face barriers to coming to the school campus, especially for disadvantaged or communities out of town:

We go to houses of kids that we know have poor attendance or have difficulties going on and we might not see their family. We run it as an actual pickup service to try and get to see kids and families in the morning and see who had breakfast, and who hasn't, and what the day plan is and see how they've gone overnight. So that's sort of checking in at the house. For those disengaged families, they're the more vulnerable families and are able to come to the school and able to be involved in that way. We run a pretty comprehensive home visit schedule, and engagement buses and things like that meant you have to go to the families when they can't come to us. (Principal, remote K – 12 college, WA)

- Setting up authentic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture by inviting local Elders to share stories, run ceremonies, and participate in the school community. Incorporate Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum in a meaningful way. This shows respect for the culture and helps ATSI students feel their identity is valued.

What works well is building genuine relationships based on trust, respect and inclusivity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Consistent personal communication and involving Aboriginal staff/families in decision-making establishes a culture where the presence and contribution of parents matters.

11.2 Families with students who have a disability

There are unique challenges and heightened communication needs for families of children with disabilities in navigating schools to find the best setting to support the needs of their children. Being a parent of a child with a disability can be an isolating experience, where they feel excluded from mainstream activities and lack adequate support systems, often leading to feelings of loneliness. Several principals spoke with understanding of the sensitivity and inclusive mindset needed when approached by families of children with disabilities.

I appreciate and understand there's another level of investment and another level of fear that comes when you have a child with additional needs, that it's really difficult to let go. (Principal, regional secondary college, NSW)

We know we're a destination school for families who've got a child with a diagnosis that needs that extra support. It's part of our Gospel work. We embrace them, they make us better teachers, and we know that can be challenging and complex. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Some effective ways that schools in the study presented in their work with families who have a child with disability include:

- Reaching out early in the enrolment process, listening to family concerns, and collaborating on developing a plan to support the child's needs. Communication from the start is crucial in building trust and confidence:

I had already spoken to the previous principal about my concerns for him starting school, so he was very aware. Then we had the official diagnosis that meant that I was coming into school with that diagnosis, and I think that helped the school find support for him in good time. By the time he started kinder, we had supports in place for him starting kinder. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Tasmania)

- Being proactive in communication with families and building relationships:

For families with children who have a disability or are neuro diverse, the school prioritises face-to-face communication and regular contact because lots happens and there are lots of changes for those families. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, ACT)

- Keeping up open and regular communication between teachers and parents as "co-educators", about how their children were progressing

We have daily contact with the parent and talk about what happened today, anything positive to share. If something happened during the day and the child was upset, what would be the trigger for that? And what would you do at home. (Teacher, regional R – 12 college, SA)

- The regular flow of information and contact with the school gives families, who are often anxious themselves, the confidence to work with the school:

My oldest son has ASD level 2, so the need for communication with the school was higher than average all the time in order to really support him. The school team as a whole worked very collaboratively from admin through to the front office staff. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

- Providing clear information on what services and accommodations the school can realistically provide as these principals explain:

We all share emails, and it's an open communication process now that we can have between each other to support each other. The more that we bring in all the support organizations to support the child the better as our time is limited as is our skill base. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

- Working with and valuing families to set accurate expectations and avoid making promises the school cannot deliver and exploring ways to increase accessibility rather than simply turning families away.

We accept young people here with disabilities or additional needs, but we need to ascertain them to determine what their needs are. I talk about that with parents as part of that consultation process, not about whether we'll take your child. I will talk about how we can support your child to come into this college. What are the needs? (Principal, regional secondary college, NSW)

- Involving families as partners and demonstrating that the school values their perspectives as these families have unmatched insights into their child's needs and incorporating their input when developing educational plans and accommodations.
- Avoiding labels that define the child solely by their disability. Schools frame accommodations as supportive tools for the child's growth, not as detrimental.

We avoid the word disability, it's just a diagnosis. The communication with those families has to be another level up. It could be an individual text message or email from the class teacher to that family to say we know this is happening today. We're thinking of putting these adjustments in, is there anything else you'd like us to do. (Principal, metro primary school, Victoria)

- Offering flexibility in communication modes like online meetings for families who face barriers attending in-person. For this parent who has a child with a disability, having a go-to contact person on the staff is important:

Just for me, it's quite personal just to have that go-to person especially when you've got a child going through things to have that person is everything. (Parent, regional primary school, Qld)

- For many children and young people with a disability, changes in school routine can be quite confronting and raise their level of anxiety. Several schools recognise the need to alert families to late changes in routine to enable families to prepare them for these changes:

We ask teachers to email every parent in their class if they are going to be away on a particular day by 7.15 to prepare the children. It's very important for the children with ASD for instance, who are anxious about any changes, to be prepared. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

- Accepting that some families of children with a disability have needed to take on the role of advocate for their child which can sometimes lead to challenging conversations with schools.

Many families find themselves having to be strong advocates to get their child access to the support services available in schools, highlighting the challenges faced by families of children with disabilities in advocating for their needs of their children.

For this parent whose child was diagnosed with several disabilities, finding herself in the role of advocate was not a positive experience:

The transition from the primary school was terrible. I started reaching out to the school about 12 months before to start building a bond. But they weren't really very interested in it at that stage and finally in those last two terms I was saying to the school come on, can we get together. We had our enrolment interview, and he was accepted and that was literally our only contact with the school before he was due to start school. (Parent, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

This less than satisfactory experience emphasizes the importance of establishing two-way communication with these families so that they feel their voice is heard and they are consulted in decision-making processes related to their child:

I think it's your mindset. We (the leadership team) just try to work through everything positively. We understand that sometimes the way those parents come across is because they have to be their child's advocate and then do it hard in a hostile world. So that helps us to understand so we've been able manage that. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

And last word from a principal with a high percentage of students with a diagnosis or imputed diagnosis:

I often make the analogy that we're working in a very busy hospital, and this is the emergency department. You've got to be able to come in and love and look after whoever is presenting in front of you, in a very highly professional way. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

11.3 Families who have a child who is disengaging from school

Most of the schools involved in this study mentioned concerns about students who were disengaging from school as a vulnerable group which were challenging to re-engage. This is one reflection by a principal working with the community to address the issue:

Looking at student engagement and student absenteeism is really important because there's usually something that sits below the surface. In the busyness of the day, it can be easy for these young men and women to slip under the radar. We know the longer a student disengages the harder it gets so we get onto it early. The challenges don't get any easier. (Principal, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

Some of the actions taken to support these students and their families include:

- Open and frequent communication as a consistent response. Teachers make regular phone calls and check-ins with families, not just when there are issues, but also to share positive updates and successes. This helps build trust and a collaborative partnership between families and the school.

One of the key considerations with any of those families is being really respectful of that family and where they are, where they're coming from, and understanding what their issues are. (Principal, regional primary school, Tasmania)

- Taking a supportive, non-judgmental approach which validates family concerns, avoids being defensive, and makes it clear that the school wants to help and has the child's best interests in mind. Their focus is on working together as a team to understand the underlying causes of disengagement.

When these kids front our door, they have a lot of baggage, their parents have a lot of baggage, and so we've got to work hard to build what we call common ground, where parents and their kids are on an equal footing with us. We're not judging those families. When we're working together, we acknowledge that there's some challenges, but we're working with parents and students. We're not just looking to suspend kids. We're not looking to judge them. We know there's going to be some challenging days, but we'll work with them. That's collaborative work. That stuff builds trust, and that builds buy in from parents, because they know we're here for the best interest of their kids. (Teacher, regional Flexi school, Qld)

- Involving families in problem-solving and inviting their input on strategies that could help re-engage their child.

They don't just give up on him. They just realise that this isn't for him. Then they try and sort of work with us to see what they could do to make it better for him or to make it more interesting for him. (Parent, CARE school, metropolitan WA)

- Remaining patient and positive. Reengaging a disengaged child can take time. A supportive, non-judgmental approach from staff is important.

We look at the whole picture as heads of year. If a student becomes disengaged, I can look at it holistically and see what else is happening or behaviour starts to pop I then look at it from a disengaged perspective, rather than a pure behaviour perspective. We keep working on why they disengaged and how we could engage them better. (Head of Year level, metropolitan secondary college, WA)

- Connecting families to support services. If disengagement seems linked to mental health, trauma or other challenges, provide referrals to counsellors, youth workers or community resources that can help the whole family.

I'll print off some pamphlets for Carers Gateway, for someone who might be a carer for a young person with a disability and they're really struggling. They might need some respite support. They don't have NDIS sorted and that parent needs the help right now. They may need a bit of respite themselves. (Counsellor, regional Flexible Learning Centre, Qld)

- A willingness to try different approaches, like modifying schedules or allowing a student to attend for limited hours as a starting point if that reduces anxiety. It's about continuously re-evaluating what's working, and being able to make adjustments as needed as this school has done with home visits:

We try to come at it from that supportive lens. The home visits have been one of the most successful things that we've had. We go to their home, and just have a general conversation. We're not even talking about the issues of school at all, we're just talking about how you look. Sometimes if we know it's a disadvantaged family, we might bring in a hamper and have a coffee chat. We've found that those home visits have at least made a good starting point for dialogue. It's just all about let's make a connection. Let's let them know that we're part of the culture of support. (Pastoral leader, regional R – 12 college, SA)

- Understanding their background and past experiences. The key is making families feel heard, supported and involved as partners in getting their child re-engaged in learning through open communication and a collaborative mindset. This mother talks about the support she received from the school as they worked through a difficult period of school refusal:

I think that pretty much just the support for myself. As a mum, I can't speak highly enough of their support for my wellbeing ... it's not just about the kids. It feels like if I'm walking in here and they ask how are you doing? And the teacher saying you okay mum? It's going to be fine. That support that was given to me was just amazing ... moral support for me through that process. It's a really good story, getting her back was like slowly, slowly, slowly. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)

Having dedicated staff to support these families and keep an open line of communication is valuable. It can be difficult to engage families who are themselves disengaged from the school for various reasons like trauma, mental health issues, or negative past experiences.

We appointed an engagement and wellbeing officer. She's been making phone calls this week, for example, just looking at the attendance and calling any family where a student has been away, just checking in with the student, to see if anything is causing school refusal. Then we'll commence home visits as part of that support and communication so we can solve the issue with the family. (Principal, regional R -12 college, SA)

Another approach is described by this principal:

That's why systems are important. Schools need to have academic tracking systems, but also absence tracking systems, and we need to be really diligent with that. (Principal, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

Long term disengaged students are of particular concern and families of these students are often referred to alternative school settings which provide a flexible approach to learning. One example is CARE schools in Western Australia and the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centres. Curriculum and Reengagement in Education (CARE) Schools have as their current prime purpose, the education of secondary aged students who have been unable to access or have

significant difficulty in accessing mainstream education. These young people fall into the category of “young people at risk”. This principal of a CARE school describes their approach to working with disengaged students:

It's a pastoral approach to enrolment of a student who has been disengaged from school for some time ... building a relationship. We have a number of conversations - how're things going? what's working? What's not working? What do we need to do differently? Who else can we support you? We'll talk about - this is what we do, this is what we offer. Are you interested, and then come and have a look. (Principal, metropolitan CARE school, WA)

11.4 Families with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) and Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds

While these two priority populations are identified as different groups, in the context of this study conversations were more broadly focused on the experiences of families for whom English is an additional language including recent migrant communities and refugees to long-established cultural groups.

There are common challenges these families face including language barriers, lack of translated resources and feeling isolated if they are one of the few families not fluent in English. One the priorities for schools supporting both EALD and CALD families is to understand their context which often involves rethinking how they traditionally engage with families.

We've got families here that have just come off the plane and in some of our interviews they would ask questions like “How does the education system work in Australia”? That really rocked me. I've never had that before. It's a beautiful question and makes you think, we're going to need to go right back and think, this is what we're gathering now, as a community. We really need to go down to the roots, and bring them in gently, and we need to communicate with them in their language. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, WA)

Schools recognise the need to embrace the first language of new families before they are able to help with the second language:

They come like the second or third day to enrol their kids after their arrival. I work with the new refugees. Not only the children, but their families as well. We work with them straight away when they arrive. My class is a bilingual class, it could be trilingual with Chaldean, Arabic and English. It's like an intensive course of English that I teach. (ESL Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

The conversations highlight the importance of effective communication strategies for families from non-English speaking backgrounds. Several key points are made:

- The significance of first interactions with new families:

I will say the reason they chose this school was that first interaction. They were received well and that welcome that they experienced, that's why families choose our school. What we constantly hear back from families is because what they know about us is that the children will be cared for and they will be cared for. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

- Schools recognize the need to provide translation or interpretation services for families who don't speak English fluently. One school mentioned having interpreters translate the newsletter into seven different languages. Families value the school translating everything, including newsletters and other materials, into their home language to facilitate effective communication because it introduced the familiar to them at a time when they are feeling overwhelmed.

For refugee families from non-English speaking background, the school does translate everything. Everything that comes to us whether it's through Seesaw or a paper version, actually gets translated. There's an English version and then a translated version. I support that. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

This school also encourages a reciprocal opportunity for families to communicate back in their native language:

After the interview, we take the families through a process that is all set, interpreted into Arabic, or Chaldean, or Kurdish. We take them slowly, slowly, and we answer them. We welcome them anytime to call us, or to write notes in Arabic and send them with the kids if they have any messages to the classroom teacher. We encourage them to write them in Arabic, and then we translate them into English for the teachers. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Several schools with smaller numbers of EALD families were able to access translation services from outside providers in the Diocese or from community providers. One principal noted that the small percentage of families requiring language support could access short-term translation services if needed. It is not uncommon, but less than ideal, for having students themselves to interpret and explain information to their non-English speaking parents in their native language. Principals acknowledge that with increasing numbers of enrolments from non-English speaking students, there is a need for translation services, interpreters, visual aids and resources in multiple languages to bridge this gap effectively.

This principal discusses the challenge in finding translation and interpretation services to improve accessibility of reports and communications for non-English families:

We're looking for interpreters and translators. That's something that a small school like ours really needs more support with, because we've got so many cultural backgrounds ... students from 29 language groups. I'm asking myself "am I hitting those messages for all these families"? I think there's a really big equity issue here. (Principal, metropolitan secondary school, Qld)

Another school has sought to access available technologies to assist with translation services:

We have asked parents if they wanted to use the Core Translator which was introduced this year in our diocese. We have asked parents if they wanted to use this and one Mum in my group who has English as her second language said she was okay with that idea, and it's been a good option for them. I can talk to them and it's a welcoming option as well. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, WA)

- Building relationships and having direct communication with non-English speaking families is seen as important. Actions taken by schools to build relationships with these family groups include:
 - Setting up signage in the school drop off and collection zone with a welcome in all the different languages represented in the school community
 - Setting up a cooking class to which families were invited as a way of introducing them to other families as well as staff
 - Hosting community nights which brought families and staff together for conversation, connection and food
 - Establishing play groups
 - Providing English and citizenship classes
 - Home visits
 - Learning walks for families
 - Three-way learning conversations
 - Employing staff with a community liaison role
 - Conducting information sessions about working with children with a disability
 - Providing support for families to access medical appointments
 - Being ready to spend time with parents, as this receptionist explains:
- Helping families to help their children with learning at home:

If my son has any issue or they've sent some homework to do at home, it is hard for me because in Iraq it's different. Education is different. So, I asked the teacher to help me how I can teach my son? She sent me home how to do it. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

- Connecting families to additional support services in the community around housing, healthcare, disability support etc. and helping families to navigate challenges in accessing these.

Our parents need support and resources for their families, for children with disabilities, children that require hospital. This area is sadly lacking basic services. If they need health services, like a child needing surgery, they have no idea about follow up appointments. We send staff with them. That's a huge resource. But we need to do it. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

The same school formed a partnership with a Primary Health Network to develop a project around health literacy and primary health care for families. One of the intended outcomes of this project was to support parent voice and agency in their children's primary health care, helping parents understand their children's developmental stages and navigating the health system effectively. Families were able to access services at the school site.

In another rural school, staff were instrumental in getting urgent specialist assistance for a child suffering a medical condition:

That's an example of the connection with this community, and the welcoming and sense of care that we extended to them, but also helping them with accessing services that can be hard for families who have recently arrived. (Principal, rural primary school, NSW)

- Sensitivity to families' cultural contexts is viewed as essential. Aware of these cultural sensitivities around the role of fathers in the predominant culture of this community, schools have turned to home visits and Family Learning Conversations in which the class teacher hosts the whole family in a conversation. One family conversation focused on learning about each other through a conversation about family names "Talk to us about your name. What is the family story that is behind your name?"

Learning conversations are all about including the family. The school does this really well. When you set that up from the word go, it's an example of the way our school works. Initially when I speak to other parents, they say that's a bit awkward, but they came back and say it went well. The teacher found out a lot about my family, and I found that a lot about her family. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

- Creating visual aids, easy-read documents, and videos can supplement written communication for families with limited English proficiency Use visual aids and multimedia. Schools are cognizant that language can be a barrier, so they try to make information easily accessible. Faced with the long lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, this school was able to find a way to reach their parents:

When COVID started, and there was a big confusion for my community, many of them are new arrivals, they had no idea what was going on like the "roadmap". Most of them had just arrived, when the borders blocked. We agreed that making videos and putting them online could work well for them. So, we educate them about what was going on to take away their anxiety. (ESL Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

This initiative was so successful it resulted in many video clips being made, some featuring several parents encouraging families to get vaccinated. These clips were placed on the school YouTube channel. The school has continued to produce short videos featuring school camp and instructional videos in Arabic explaining school policies and programs.

- Building connections with cultural communities

Engaging with cultural leaders and communities represented at the school can help facilitate communication and understanding.

We engage very deliberately with the African community ... Swahili is our second largest language group. We have an African young woman working here as a youth worker and because of her, we were able to tap into the Sudanese youth group in Brisbane. We had a fantastic night where African parents came, they shared food. We were able to have African Sudanese young people

from other schools. We asked parents what they wanted and what they thought about our communications. We got all this rich data from that experience. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Given how central the school is in the lives of families moving to Australia, it is not surprising that parents interviewed in this study appreciate the actions put in place by schools to bridge the communication gap through translations, interpreters, and building connections with cultural communities represented at the school. Schools have demonstrated a willingness to explore a wide range of ways of connecting with families. Effective communication for these families requires cultural sensitivity, removing language barriers, using diverse channels, building personal relationships, and understanding the unique needs of different family groups.

11.5 Families from regional, rural and remote communities including Boarding School families

In small communities the school is an integral part of the community. It is often the centre of many activities – both educational and social. In boarding schools, the boarding community is generally held in high regard, as this principal affirms:

Consideration of the special requirements of our boarders permeates every aspect of the College's decision-making process and there is no doubt that the real sense of family we experience here is nourished by the special blessings that accrue to the College from the presence of its boarders. (Principal, regional secondary college, Qld).

There are many challenges for both families and schools that are part of everyday life in rural and remote areas. Some of the challenges are referenced in these reflections of parents, the first from a parent who travels over 800km a week driving her children to the nearest bus stop, with only one trip to town each week:

I don't drop my children into school or pick them up, they catch a bus in and out because we live a long way out of town. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)

We're from a regional cattle property, about eight and half hours' drive from the college. Some come from much further away (including some from overseas countries), so if they don't have family in town, they're totally relying on the boarding house and the school to look after our kids when they need doctor's appointments, to get them to sport and get them to music practice or part time work as part of their early apprenticeship. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

From a principal in a remote town community:

We serve vulnerable and disadvantaged kids and, and kids at the other end of the spectrum, which is the most complex part of a town setting in this region. We are trying to serve a spectrum of families and students, and we have to deal with this in a myriad of different ways. It's about connection and a sense of belonging for those parents and those students. We are true partners, because we don't have kids that can just come on in and fend for themselves. It's a wrap around the child, wrap around family approach. (Principal, remote K – 12 college, WA)

There are a number of insights regarding communication between schools and families in rural and remote areas and for those whose children attend boarding schools:

- Many families in rural and remote communities may have limited internet access or connectivity issues. As a result, schools employ various communication methods to ensure important information reaches these families

Some of families have to travel some distance, maybe an hour on the bus with a lot of stops. We do keep track of how things are going, and we are able to communicate in different ways. If they're not responding to say an email, we'll find a different way of contacting them. We try to vary the communication method to make sure we are reaching the parents. (Teacher, rural primary school, NSW)

- Face-to-face interactions and building personal connections are highly valued for rural and remote families. Schools make efforts to have staff available for face-to-face meetings and create opportunities for families to visit the school during events or student pick-up times.

Being a small town, everyone knows everyone. You have a relationship with the school, you might also have a relationship with the staff outside of the school as well. So, you know them on a personal level. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)

- Flexibility is needed in the school communication approach, recognizing that rural and remote families may have different schedules, commitments or access constraints:

I'm working in an environment where I'm near a computer most of the day but my husband's out in the paddock in a remote place, so he's got no idea what's going on most of the time. There would be lots of parents who don't live in the world that I live in. So that kind of communication probably doesn't really work for most parents out here. (Boarding Parent, metropolitan secondary school, WA)

These conversations provide several insights into effective communication between schools and boarding families. Boarding families highly value regular communication and updates from the school to feel engaged and involved in their child's education and activities. Timely communication helps alleviate concerns when issues arise and provides reassurance for parents:

The first 12 months for most parents are really challenging, because everything is new with your children away from home and often our kids are still only 11 years old. We become totally reliant on the school. (Boarding parent, regional secondary college, Qld)

- Schools utilise various channels like email, phone calls, parent portals/apps, weekly newsletters with photos, and social media to keep boarding families informed about their child's wellbeing, academic progress, disciplinary issues, and upcoming events/activities. This staff member showed how the school was able to adapt the school portal to present important information in a more accessible and timely mode for boarding families:

The activities that the boarders do each week originally were just on paper and not really accessible for parents. I've put those onto the portal so parents can see it, students can see it too and now have all the information they need to consider. I just update this information each week. (Leader Digital technologies, metro secondary college, WA)

- Having a clear communication protocol and designated contact persons for boarding parents is important, as they cannot easily reach out to teachers or staff in the same way as day students' families. Boarding house staff often act as the liaison between school and boarding families.

Knowing exactly who you need to contact with specific things is very important for boarding parents. (Teacher, metropolitan boarding school, WA)

This school modified the process for families collecting their boarders to enable a simple, informal catch-up with boarding staff:

Our AP boarding has introduced a better way for the parents when we know they're going to come in and get their kids for long weekends or end of term. They put on afternoon tea so that the parents can pop in to see boarding staff whereas before they were getting no further than the foyer. (Principal, regional secondary college, Qld)

- Schools make efforts to facilitate engagement by livestreaming events, offering video recordings of parent info sessions, and hosting meetups during student pickup times for boarding families and those from rural communities who may not be able attend school events:

If we have school events, we will often livestream things like academic assemblies or masses anything so that the parents can see and be part of it. We've also had success with visiting

presenters who have allowed us to keep a link up for a couple of days for parents who can't get into the college. (Principal, regional secondary college, Qld)

- Establishing formal parent advisory councils/groups specifically for the parents who aren't able to attend the school to enable them a voice and mechanism to provide feedback to the school.

We have to keep in mind that there's a group of parents who can't be here every day. (Principal, regional secondary college, Qld)

Actions to include families of boarders include holding virtual parent meetings for boarding families each term, including a boarding parent on the school advisory council and in another school where there was a shared community boarding facility, having a parent from the school on the boarding school advisory council.

- Effective communication requires understanding of all school staff of the unique challenges faced by boarding families, such as being geographically distant, having limited physical interactions, and relying heavily on the school for their child's overall wellbeing. This parent highlighted that day teachers need to have a better appreciation of what it was like to be a boarder:

Day teachers have to understand that boarders do not see their parents or even speak with them daily. They might not think about the fact that this group of boys are not going home and having those conversations around the dinner table or in the car on the way to work or sports practice. They don't have that daily opportunity for connection with home. (Boarding parent, metropolitan secondary college, WA)

While staff who work in both the day school and boarding are likely to have a better understanding of what life is like for the boarders, it is not always possible or sustainable to have staff working across both day and boarding arrangements.

Conversations in rural schools and with families of boarders highlight the need for schools to use open, multi-channel communication that bridges the physical distance, provides timely updates, and gives boarding families a voice is crucial for building strong school-family partnerships. There is also a strong case for highlighting the particular challenges and supports for families in rural, remote and boarding schools as part of the induction of staff and avoiding assumptions which may be more appropriate of day students.

12. How teachers are prepared for engaging with families

12.1 Initial Teacher Education

Given that family engagement has such significant potential for improving academic achievement and wellbeing of children and young people, it is vital that teachers are well prepared for this important work with families. One of the lines of enquiry in this study has been to gain some understanding about how teacher readiness for communicating with and supporting family engagement is undertaken at universities as part of Initial Teacher Education Training.

Not a great deal of Australian research has focused on this area. Saltmarsh, Barr and Chapman (2015) conducted a study which focused on how family-school relationships were taught across Initial Teacher Education courses in the context of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2014). While this was able to 'challenge suggestions that family-school engagement is largely absent from pre-service programs' (Saltmarsh et al., 2015, p. 69), it did highlight that there were many areas of ITE where family engagement skills and opportunities for working with families were not considered for inclusion in ITE courses and that inadequate inclusion of family engagement would lead to some beginning teachers entering 'their profession insufficiently prepared for parent engagement' (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 82). These authors stated that this gap needed 'urgent attention' (p. 82). Saltmarsh et al.

The Commonwealth Government Department of Education and Training initiated a comprehensive research project to address the knowledge gap in this area. That research project, a collaboration between the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the Australian Council of Deans in Education (ACDE) resulted in the *Families Welcome* report prepared by Professor David Geelan and Dr Michelle Ronksley-Pavia in March 2018.

In providing an overview of the ways in which Universities worked with beginning teachers to prepare them for family engagement, the *Families Welcome* report (AITSL, 2018) concluded that:

Earlier research reviewed showed significant gaps in the attention paid to parent engagement in ITE, but there have been significant changes recently in Australian teacher education. As part of ongoing teacher education reforms, in 2016 and 2017, every Australian ITE program was required to be accredited or re-accredited to meet AITSL Standards and Procedures. This report's survey findings should be seen within the context of that accreditation regime.



Anna Whiteley, *How to build a strong home school partnership*. Medium.com (Mar 21, 2019).

The embodiment of family engagement in a number of AITSL's Australian Professional Standards for Teachers has been a "game changer" for education generally and for universities and teacher organisations in particular. Two standards are specific to parent engagement:

Standard 3.7 Engage parents/carers in the educative process: describe a broad range of strategies for involving parents/carers in the educative process; and,

Standard 7.3 Engage with parents/carers: understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers.

Additionally, Standard 2.4 which focuses on engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has relevance:

Standard 2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians: demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, culture and language.

Each of these standards requires principals, teachers and support staff to build relationships and communication channels with parents and carers, to understand the communities that their schools serve and to invite, welcome and support parents' and carers' active engagement in the learning of their children and young people. (Geelan and Ronksley-Pavia, 2018, p 12).

As there appears to have been no more recent published research to enhance the findings of this report, this CSPA study has focused on what the Australian Catholic University (ACU), the provider with Australia's largest suite of teacher education programs and largest enrolment in initial teacher education. ACU has been working on research into, and implementation of, parental engagement.

An interview with a senior ACU academic provided insights about how Australian Catholic University (ACU) prepares pre-service teachers to engage with families in their children's learning. In this discussion, the ACU staffer was keen to dispel any notion that the university preparation amounted to a few bespoke courses or token activities involving parents. These insights include:

- Moving the narrative about including parents to the more inclusive terminology of parent engagement away from traditional notions of how parents could be involved at school, which resonates with Recommendation 9 from the Families Welcome (2018, p. 6) report:

Shift the focus from parent involvement (which typically decreases from early childhood through primary and secondary schooling) to parent engagement in student learning.

- Across all units, there is an emphasis on the importance of parent-teacher relationships and engaging the community in education.

Well, I can only speak about the implications of the professional teacher standards, that they are very important, and we have made changes to all of our courses. My short answer is that every unit that we do will invest some form of education and reflective practice on the importance of parents and community in our schools and the relationship between teacher, child and parent. We don't just include that in one course. (Assoc. Professor in Education, ACU).

This practice was also recommended in the *Parents Welcome* report (AITSL, 2018) in Recommendation 7:

Encourage teacher education providers to integrate the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions in this area across multiple courses in both undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programs, rather than to rely on a single course/unit.

Specific units in areas such as educational sociology and child development also cover working with parents/carers in more depth, noting that units like educational sociology and child development cover concepts related to understanding students' family contexts and how that impacts their learning and development.

- ACU brings in guest speakers including parents, principals, teachers, early childhood educators and representatives of state and territory parent Organisations to share their perspectives with students. It was acknowledged that attendance at these sessions was not compulsory for students. This practice was also encouraged in the Families Welcome (AITSL, 2018) report Recommendation 8:

Build in additional experience of engaging with parents and communities as part of courses to give all pre-service teachers opportunities to engage with parents and families.

- Some ACU seasonal lecturers were practising teachers and principals who brought the real-life experience of working with families into their university classes. In other research contexts, bringing the practical shared wisdom of school practice at the level of specific content, classroom activities and assignments that require interaction with parents is known as “infusion” (M. Antony – Newman: Preparing teachers for family engagement: role of teacher educators in Canada.2024, p8). This Canadian research suggests that many teacher educators are in fact using the “infusion” approach and it appears that ACU academics are using this approach without necessarily naming it.

Conversations with several ACU lecturers also amplified continuing challenges for this university and individual academics whose personal enthusiasm for preparing beginning teachers for engaging with families could be the cause of some tension within the faculty. This tension is exhibited in several ways:

- The difficulty of securing a permanent place in the ITE curriculum for specific family engagement courses due to the pressure of accreditation requirements and the need to cover assessments.
- The challenge in contextualising the family engagement narrative within widely diverse cohorts of students, although there would certainly be a generic set of skills and dispositions applying to all teaching contexts. It was acknowledged that while early childhood education programs at ACU successfully prepare graduates to engage families due to the young age of the children, preparation of graduates for secondary education remained a challenge. While the need for stronger parent-teacher relationships in secondary schools was highlighted as this is

a critical period where students grapple with identity and future direction, it was acknowledged that more work needed to be done to prepare graduates for family engagement in a secondary setting.

- Securing a permanent curricular focus on this competency remains an ongoing challenge, especially at the secondary level where courses were shorter for graduates who were already qualified.

12.2 Emerging opportunities at Australian Catholic University (ACU)

Conversations with ACU staff emphasized ACU's efforts to embed family engagement concepts throughout the curriculum, while recognizing there were still opportunities to enhance practical training for navigating those critical first interactions with families as a new teacher. While the details are limited, it seems ACU takes a multi-pronged approach of dedicated coursework, guest speakers, and an overall curricular focus to help their pre-service teachers build awareness and understanding of the range of family situations that can impact a student's educational experience.

There was commitment to continuing improvement, that efforts to build the capacity and dispositions of graduates remained a priority and some emerging opportunities may provide additional ways to enhance the AITSL standards for teachers.

Among the emerging opportunities identified were:

- Collaboration with schools, parent groups and universities to investigate the better use of Practicums to provide graduates with more authentic family engagement processes, albeit with some privacy concerns to be addressed. For example, having student teachers observe and participate in actual teacher meetings/conferences during their practicums. This was also a recommendation of the Families Welcome report (AITSL, 2018), Recommendation 6:

Develop richer collaborations between universities, schools and communities to allow students to participate in authentic contact with parents and carers.

- Recognising that while integrating courses into teacher education degrees can address students' knowledge and attitudes, the development of skills typically requires opportunities to practice. Such opportunities can be challenging to offer in the context of university programs and professional experience placements. Scope could be explored for developing simulation opportunities and /or nominating a specific communication skill to feature in specific practicums.
- Including in practicums a more formalized conversation with school leadership with new graduates about the family demographics, ways of life, and expectations around family involvement at that particular school.
- Including in a final practicum, the opportunity to work with an experienced classroom teacher to work through the communication challenges that teachers would likely encounter in the first month of the school year including how to begin two-way communication with families preparing a parent-teacher meeting (preferably with a less intimidating title), preparing to have a sensitive conversation eg about behaviour or learning needs.
- A new ACU Initial Teacher Education course with a specific focus on Communication. The inclusion of a new course EDES 302 Professional Communication from 2024 marks a more intentional approach by the University to enhance the readiness of graduates for family engagement by introducing a mandatory, stand-alone course (See Appendix 4 copy of the course).

The stated objective of this ACU Course is to “develop pre-service teachers’ professional communications skills for different audiences and purposes”, a generic aim which addresses the broader imperative to prepare teachers for effective communication in all elements of their teaching.

Completion of this unit is designed to provide exposure to and understanding of the relevant AITSL standards which, including those which reference communication with families (Standards 3.7 and 7.3). Additionally, the unit addresses ACECQA Curriculum specifications, notably D1: developing

family and community partnerships. Two assessment tasks provide an opportunity for students to focus more specifically on family engagement. This includes a Reflection journal which highlights research and reflection on effective strategies for involving parents/carers in the education of their child and for working sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers and compilation of a portfolio of artefacts with at least two examples of communication with parents.

Inclusion of this mandatory unit in the pre-service training of current ACU students (with around 600 students enrolled in 2024) is a positive development in preparing graduates for engaging with families. It is acknowledged that more work by the university is needed in this important component of Initial teacher education. Based on the findings of this study, there are four suggestions for strengthening this unit.

- i) There appears to be little rationale or focus highlighting the importance of effective teacher – parent communication to build relationships, and to build and enhance family engagement which supports student learning. The narrative in the unit outline is limited to “parent involvement” which does not suggest the deeper significance of engagement.
- ii) The unit outline speaks exclusively of communications skills development, which is seminal to teaching. However, there is no reference to the mindset and dispositions which inform teacher practice, as identified in the *Families Welcome* report (AITSL, 2018, p18),

Our review of Australian and international literature has highlighted two broad themes in the contribution of ITE programs to parent engagement: 1. Skills and strategies 2. Attitudes, perceptions and dispositions. The two do overlap but some studies focus more on what pre-service teachers know how to do, while others look at the ways in which pre-service teachers mentally frame parent engagement and their ways of thinking about parents and relationships.

The course ESE302 seems to be heavily focused on skills for communication more generally.

- iii) Inclusion of specific parent engagement content, possibly by utilising the “infusion approach” (Antony-Newman, 2024, p. 8) described as:

The “infusion” approach seems to be the most viable option for most teacher education programmes. ... The infusion happens at the level of specific content, classroom activities, and assignments that teacher candidates have to complete. Teacher educators design activities where students would involve parents or community members and bring their knowledge into the classroom, which bridges the gap between the home and school domains.

- iv) Inclusion of specific references and sources about family engagement in the listed Representative texts and references which inform this course. Inclusion of texts and resources authored by people like Mapp, Goodall and Montgomery, Pushor, Constantino and Weinzapfel and from the Australian context the work of ARACY, the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) CSPA and researchers including Barr and Saltmarsh.
- v) Workshops which give students practical experience in key points of connection with families such as:
 - Writing a parent communication such as a weekly newsletter
 - Providing parents with some practical tips to support their child’s learning in the next teaching unit
 - Conducting phone call about a student altercation in the classroom
 - Sequencing a face-to face interview with a parent about student progress
 - Handling a difficult conversation with a parent
 - Leading several parents through a Learning Walk and Talk
 - Conducting Family Learning Conversation.

This work can be done by engaging preservice teachers in a reflective practice that urges them to shift from a place of judgment, to actively finding points of commonality between educators' and parents' values around caring for children. Preservice teachers should, therefore, be afforded as many opportunities as possible to interact with parents. (Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg and Harry (2017).

12.3 Courses on parent engagement and communication at other universities

While it was only possible to conduct a cursory scan of ITE offerings in other universities around Australia, it is encouraging to see that a number of courses seem more directed to Parent Engagement than the ACU course. Appendix 5 lists several additional ITE courses. Even the title of some of these courses suggests a more intentional focus of family engagement:

University of Sydney: Course/Unit: EDD6163 - Family and Community Engagement in Education

Queensland University of Technology: Course/Unit: EDD612 - Engaging Families and Communities

12.4 Perceptions of teachers and principals about ITE

The majority of teachers interviewed in this study had more than 5 years' experience on the job with only a handful being recent graduates with less than 5 years teaching experience. Albeit the time gap since their initial teacher education, teachers interviewed overwhelmingly expressed that their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them for effective family engagement and communication. Here are some key points they mentioned:

- Many teachers felt they received little to no specific training on how to communicate and build relationships with families during their teacher education programs. One recent graduate recalled:

At Uni, there was some focus on, yes, you need to have this communication, and it's very important. That was it. It wasn't, here's how to have these meetings, here's what you might need to consider when going into a meeting with a parent or contacting parents. It felt like ... you should do this. But they're not going to really tell you how. (Teacher, rural primary school, WA)

- Asked about preparation for communicating with parents, especially around sensitive topics like poor behaviour in class, a recent graduate confided to her mentor:

I don't have any [training] in relation to that (communicating with parents). So, it's on the job. (Teacher, CARE school, metropolitan WA)

- Another teacher noted that while the university training concentrated on curriculum and technology, it lacked training on practical skills like:

Communicating with a range of diverse adults which is crucial for parent engagement. (Teacher, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

Most teachers felt underprepared by their pre-service education for the realities of family engagement, an area they now see as critically important for student success. On-the-job mentoring and school induction programs are attempting to fill this gap. Several teachers who entered the profession after working in other areas in the workforce, highlighted their previous job experience in areas like retail, marketing and hospitality as being influential in their approach to working with families. One teacher from another industry reflected:

My experience as marketing coordinator prepared me well. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

Principals by and large were dismissive of what universities were doing in their Initial Teacher Education to prepare teachers for engaging with families. Asked what he thought universities were doing in this area, one principal stated:

Nothing! Not from what I've heard anecdotally and been told. Very little. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, ACT)

Principals acknowledged this gap, with one stating their school induction program included dedicated sessions on parent communication and engagement to support new teachers.

Black, bold lettering. The two biggest fears for teachers entering the profession are parents and behaviour management. There seems to be very little at a university level for both. Perhaps there's more behaviour management than family school partnerships and dealing with parents. Every graduate we have employed, it's if they got one lecture on this topic, they were doing well. So, it's just part of the induction here. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)

Many teachers mentioned learning more from experienced colleagues and mentors once on the job, through modelling, role-playing difficult conversations, and getting feedback on written communications to families. To bridge this gap, schools provide mentorship programs and induction training to support new teachers in developing family communication skills.

Overall, teachers in this study expressed their view that pre-service training lacked sufficient focus on both essential skills for effectively engaging and communicating with families, the significance of the role of teachers in working with families and the mindset that valued working in authentic partnerships with families. They have relied on learning on the job with support from experienced colleagues and their school leadership.

12.5 What schools are doing to prepare teachers for Family Engagement

Principals noted that the gap left as universities didn't seem to focus much on preparing teachers for the important role of family engagement, meant that the responsibility for preparing teachers was left to the schools. One commented:

We've got a very small number of early career teachers. So (the DP) meets with those teachers every week and talks through any scenarios and role plays. So, for example, before the parent teacher interviews, we've had a meeting with those teachers saying this is your first parent - teacher interview, these are the sorts of things that you might expect, how are you going with that particular student. We know that parent can be a little bit tricky, so we might sit with you in that parent teacher interview, just in case there's any tension there. We give them support with communication guidelines and protocols for communication. (Principal, regional secondary, NSW)

Some principals feel universities should do more to instil the right "mindset" in new teachers about the importance of family engagement, in addition to building practical communication skills. One principal expanded on this theme:

We need to really carefully re-design our onboarding process about this in the way we'd like you to work with parents. (Principal, metropolitan R -12 college, SA)

Another principal was more specific about the right frame of mind for teachers to engage with families and worked with early career teachers to see relationship building as the way to empower families:

If you don't have that relationship with parents, it can make your life so much harder. What I have seen happen is, if the teachers' communication is not strong, then it can get parents offside and groups of parents offside. Teachers do have to be approachable and willing to listen and willing to give the time to parents. (Principal, regional primary school, WA)

Principals list key elements of their induction and early career mentoring initiatives which support teachers to build personal confidence and competence in family engagement including:

- Designing an induction program for new teachers which includes opportunities to learn and rehearse parent communication and engagements strategies
- Appointing an early career teacher mentor skilled in working with families to meet regularly to discuss scenarios and provide coaching on communication with parents
- Having new teachers shadow experienced teachers during parent-teacher conversations for support and providing a debriefing opportunity

- Developing communication protocols around writing emails, including response time, tone, timing, seeking feedback before sending emails, a process for making phone calls, documenting conversations and decision making and responding to emotional response from families.

Principals generally agree that pre-service training falls short of their expectations in preparing beginning teachers for the crucial role of family engagement and communication. As a result, schools take on that responsibility by providing mentorship, modelling communication and explicit training during onboarding to build these essential skills in new teachers. The overall feedback is that while theory is important, universities need to incorporate more practical, real-world training on navigating the challenges of effective teacher communication from day one.

13. Emerging issues and challenges

As the rich insights from this study have revealed, there are numerous challenges for school communities which set out to build the kind of school-family relationships that result in strong partnerships which build toward family engagement in learning.

Several emerging issues have surfaced in this study which add to the complexity of the process of building and maintaining effective engagement between schools and families. Five themes are identified for further discussion:

- meeting the communication needs of contemporary families
- expectations placed on school staff
- communication challenges which families encounter in times of transition
- Reaching families who are not engaging with the school
- Joining the dots from school - family involvement to family engagement in learning

13.1 Meeting the communication needs of contemporary families

Previous discussion about considerations for engaging with different priority family groups highlights particular characteristics of these families which schools embrace. However, there are many additional layers of family circumstances which also impact on the capacity of both schools and families to engage in the learning of children and young people. Some comments are indicative of those complexities:

- Covid related

Since COVID we've found that we're not getting the amount of buy-in we used to get and we're struggling to get our parents back into the school. (Principal, regional secondary school, NSW)

- The busyness of family life:

Most of our families have a dual income, so their lives are pretty busy, fast paced, and what that means is that first and foremost we need to let them know clearly what's happening for the next two weeks. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, NSW)

Work hours are completely different to what they used to be. No longer can we rely on 90% of the population working from nine to five and schools coinciding with that. It's trying to fit in fly in fly out, it's trying to fit in with parents who could be on call. It's the 24/7 economy, so there's another degree of complexity for all. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, WA)

- Diverse family structures: Single parent families, Blended families, shared custody arrangements:

There are broken families, so many children have more than one family unit they go home with, where the child is shared between two households. There will be one week where everything is completed and replied to and the other week, it just goes to a back court. That also adds a layer of complexity for the staff who have a daily interaction with those families. (Parent, metropolitan primary school, NSW)

- Changing societal attitudes towards teaching profession impacts family-school relationships.

Over the years, one of the noticeable things is the difference in levels of respect that the general public has for the teaching profession. The authoritarian approach where the teacher had full respect of the family has changed and now, we've got families and students challenging the college. We have to make sure we're moving from the authoritarian to a pastoral approach where there will be more success in the long run. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Qld).

- Varying levels of parental involvement:

Some parents are time-poor while others want deeper engagement with the school. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Qld)

One-size-fits-all communication is ineffective for the increasing complexity of schools and the communities they serve, requiring tailored communication approaches. Schools can no longer rely on traditional communication methods and must be more inclusive, strategic and personalized in reaching out to the varied family contexts represented in their communities.

13.2 Expectations placed on school staff

There is strong understanding among those interviewed in this study that effective communication is essential to building relationships that can positively influence the learning and wellbeing of children and young people. Equally, there is acknowledgment that there is a cost associated with this commitment.

We have to prioritise our communication efforts and also recognise that it's just one of the roles and responsibilities of staff in schools, whether they're teachers or support staff, because the administrative workload on teachers has increased. (Principal, regional secondary school, NSW)

It's a good thing that we're actually focusing on communication with parents. But from a time point of view, it is a stretch sometimes too. If it's the true focus of the school, they may need to look at putting in extra layers to support staff along the way. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

The need to respect teachers' work-life balance and not expect them to respond to emails or other communications outside of normal working hours is highlighted as an important principle that some schools are trying to reinforce with families and staff. Several schools have developed protocols for both families and staff to provide guidance and measure expectations. Others have chosen to place some restrictions for parent access to staff email addresses. In other settings there is now more reliance on new technologies to make communication more accessible from handheld devices, effectively providing 24/7 access to information without an expectation for teachers to be accessible out of school hours. The use of continuous reporting (or real time reporting), which is an additional feature of some Learning Management Systems, is becoming more common as one practical measure for taking some pressure off teachers.

I see that the shift to real time reporting has been one good step, a more efficient way of communicating with parents. We know teaching is also getting very time-consuming. So being able to provide more data, but efficiently and at more regular time periods, has helped with that communication. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Tasmania)

Currently measures to manage expectations around what teachers can reasonably be expected to do and respond to are featured in both Enterprise Bargaining processes and in new Right to Disconnect legislation passed by the Federal Government in August 2024. At its core, the Right to Disconnect aims to promote better work-life balance for employees like teachers who face out-of-hours work demands. Schools have been encouraged to embrace this principle and limit out-of-hours work when absolutely necessary and unavoidable.

As part of the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement about blackout periods for staff around communication, we've got messages through the EB around trying to manage some of this digital communication from parents. We've always had guidelines, but staff have realised that a quick

email to a parent to say, "Hey, Johnny had a great lesson today" is returned tenfold. Positive communication like that is what good teachers do. Yet, I think there's a real recognition around workflow for people. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)

13.3 Communication challenges which families encounter in times of transition

It is not surprising that one of the themes emerging from the study is how the need for effective two-way communication is amplified in periods of transition in the family journey through schools. The beginning of a new experience is generally an exciting time but with it also comes with a level of apprehension in making first steps into the unfamiliar. Transition is a social process, unique to each child and their family, involving many stakeholders and extending over time.

The significant transitions parents identified were:

- Pre-school/kinder/reception to primary school; and
- Primary school to secondary school.

Starting school and moving to secondary school are significant transition times during which children and young people experience increased anxiety, stress or apprehension in the face of these major changes in their lives. It is also the case that these significant transitions can be anxious times for families.

Pre-school/ day care to Kindergarten / Prep

Any major transition can be challenging for families, and the transition into primary school is one of those key transitions identified by parents. This transition in particular requires communication to be sensitive to family needs to keep families informed and engaged as things change for their child. In many ways, this is the prime time for schools to bring the very best of their strategies for welcoming new families and building the foundations for a lasting partnership.

It's a big shock for parents, whose first child is coming from preschool to kindergarten, because they're used to a preschool or daycare environment where you're getting daily feedback. That's probably an area that every school needs to consider, especially when parents are probably more anxious these days than what they once were, with a lot more helicopter parenting. Parents, especially in that transition, even that first term of kindergarten, just want to know that things are okay. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)

Starting school is a big step for children and helping them transition to school is an important part of their journey of life-long learning. By prioritizing open communication, personalized support, and consistency, schools can help smooth the pre-school to primary transition for both children and their families.

Primary to Secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school (year 6 to year 7) is a critical period that requires focused communication strategies. Families often feel disconnected as their child moves into a larger school environment with multiple teachers. During these times their children typically must learn to adjust to a new environment, understand new rules and expectations, interact with a new set of peers and learn to navigate a much larger school setting. Learning about change and how to cope with it can be exciting and overwhelming all at once.

At each stage of the student's life, they have with their school, and the relationship that the parent has with their child, the communication is critical, but it changes, and the mode and the delivery all need to adapt to that. It's important to set expectations around communication changes from primary to secondary school. (Parent, metropolitan secondary college, Victoria)

It would be good if in the transition period, the staff explained all processes rather than assuming we know, even if you're from the same school but from a different campus. (Parent, metropolitan R – 12 college, SA)

Many schools do prioritize building positive relationships with new students and families through

introductory events, tours, and direct teacher outreach during this time:

First and foremost, we set the parents up with direct lines of communication, make it simple for them. They come from an existence in a primary school where they see that same teacher every day. When it comes to secondary school with so many different teachers, it's a whole new ballgame for them. We say to parents, if you have an issue about how your son is feeling, speak to the head of year or the form teacher. If you are concerned about a score in maths or how they're going in terms of achievement, these are the people that you might consider contacting. We make it really clear to them that those staff are ready and waiting to help you. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, WA)

The independence that comes with adolescence can make communication more challenging as children get older. Schools adapt strategies, finding the right balance between sharing information and respecting the young person's autonomy. There is an expectation that secondary students should be more independent, but this doesn't necessarily mean that families need to be less engaged. Effective communication between all parties is still critical during this transition period from the start of secondary school, recognizing that this is likely a 6-year journey together.

It is important to view transitions for children not as single events but as pathways to later successful outcomes particularly toward learning. Successful transitions can increase positive social, emotional and academic outcomes for children and young people. There are other transitions besides those highlighted which may appear to be minor but have significance for some families. These include:

- Change of teacher from year to year or during the school year
- Change of Principal
- Amalgamation of several schools or previously split campuses
- The complete rebuilding or relocation of a school

Whatever the transition, being proactive, personal, and responsive in communication during any transitional period helps build trust and engagement between schools and families for the child's benefit.

From the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools**, the **Start Early** actions (refer Addendum 1) describe how schools interact successfully with families leading up to Pre-enrolment, enrolment and orientation

13.4 Reaching families who are not engaging with the school

There is real awareness of and concern for families who don't engage or communicate much with the school. Among the factors identified by principals are:

- previous interactions that made them feel uncomfortable or unwelcome
- Language and cultural barriers
- busy schedules and time constraints
- lack awareness of how to appropriately engage with the school
- families dealing with complex situations like domestic violence, trauma, unemployment and tensions around the increasing tension around the cost of living.

As these insights suggest, there is a mixture of frustration, concern and desire to find new ways to reach parents:

That unintentional disconnect between home and school ... it doesn't happen because the school wants that to happen. Some parents are starting to grow away from school because their kids are getting older, they need less supervision. This is what schools struggle with as the kids get older, that disconnecting with trying to engage the parents is incredibly difficult. (Teacher, regional primary school, Qld)

Schools are being proactive in identifying potential barriers, offering multiple communication channels, being welcoming and inclusive, and providing targeted support to facilitate engagement with all families, especially those who, for whatever reason, are not engaging with the school. Several

schools mentioned leveraging off celebrations of student achievements and school events the students get excited about:

- Including the students in school – parent communications (secondary students)
- Inviting families to celebrate achievements and milestones
- Multi-cultural events where families share their customs, cooking and cultural dance and music
- Having students interview their parents to gain parent feedback and insights.

For some principals there was one sure way of bringing families into the school:

We believe strongly that in our setting it's getting the kids doing stuff at school like performing and sport that brings the parents in. That's a good start. (Principal, remote K -12 college, WA)

Something I've learned over time is to sell the idea at school, get the children all excited and pumped up about it. Then they're telling their parents and helping to get the message across, and they want to be there, then the parents will bring them. (Principal, regional primary school, WA)

In secondary schools, there is more intentional communication with older students, which includes a link to families and opportunities for good conversations between parents and their children:

There is a lot of messaging that happens at assemblies, and from there we will follow up with an email to the students, and then also emails to parent groups. Prior to the return of students, each term, we tend to send them an email, the most recent one was uniform and grooming reminders, and a reminder that we're moving to be to the winter uniform. It works better for our year eleven students. It's about having them make educated and informed decisions. So, you're speaking with them as a young adult. (Director, Senior campus, Metro secondary college, Victoria)

13.5 Joining the dots from school - family involvement to family engagement in Learning

In what is possibly the biggest challenge for schools working with families to support their children's learning and wellbeing is shifting the focus from family involvement activities to family engagement practices:

The challenge for schools is prioritising and investing in ongoing programs that cultivate cumulative improvement in parental engagement. Targeted investment in parental engagement programs not only enhances students' educational outcomes but also contributes to the overall wellbeing and cohesion of the wider school community.

The evidence collected in this study suggests while there are many examples of school practices which are directed to building parent engagement, many schools continue to focus on providing parent involvement opportunities. Fewer schools articulate an intention to highlight ways for families to engage in the learning of their children and young people.

14. A call to action: shifting the focus from family involvement to family engagement

14.1 Towards an understanding of family involvement as the necessary first steps to family engagement

In the pursuit of evidence about what it is to build and maintain effective school-family communication, there is a compelling case to be clear about the purpose of effective communication in a school – family context.

As an organisation, CSPA (CSPA Position Statement: Building Effective School-Family Relationships. CSPA Website 2024) has sought to support family engagement as the means for enhancing student learning and wellbeing:

CSPA believes that schools and families share responsibility for the academic success for children and youth. Schools need to implement consistent, collaborative approaches to engage parents and families in their child's learning.

and, as a consequence,

Schools need to understand the distinction between family involvement and family engagement. Involvement implies a more passive process. Involvement has been described as “doing to” while engagement implies “doing with.” Thus, it is critical that schools acknowledge the valuable contributions of parents and families and “engage” them in all facets of the school.

In both the literature and conversations with the key stakeholders in school communities, several terms are used which amplify the necessity for focusing on communication as both a process and an underlying culture which provide the foundation for the shared goal of education – the improvement of student learning and wellbeing.

Terms like parent involvement or participation and parent engagement are often used interchangeably along with notions of partnerships built on communication and relationship building. In the ARACY report Parent Engagement in Student Learning (2018, p 16) this blurring of terminology is identified:

Many schools tend to readily revert to concepts (and terminology) around parent involvement in school and / or schooling in which agency rests predominantly with the school and which parents are expected to adhere to as a willing partner.

It is important to be clear about what these terms mean and how they are linked. The Family – School Partnerships Framework developed by the Australian Government Department of Education (2022) provides additional clarity to better understand these terms:

The terms parent engagement and parent involvement describe how parents and families support their children's academic achievement and wellbeing. Parent involvement usually focuses on school-based activities such as attending events or volunteering in class.

Parent engagement encompasses children's learning at home, at school and in the community, recognising the cultural and social diversity of families and communities. There is strong evidence linking parent engagement with improvements in academic achievement for children of all ages.

Family engagement positions the role of families as integral and essential to the learning and wellbeing of children and young people, and by implication, families simply can't be overlooked or sidelined in the educational process. In their Our School – Our Future Issues paper 2020: *Engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing* Willis and Exley, p. 6 conclude that:

The shared goals of parents and teachers, consistent findings from local and international research, and the increased prominence of parent engagement in Australian policy, research and practice have meant that all sectors – independent, public and Catholic – now consider parent engagement a priority to improve schools and learning and wellbeing outcomes for all students.

Goodall and Montgomery, (2014 b, p 403) proposed a framework which represents parent involvement and parent engagement as co-existing on a continuum where parent involvement is at one end and parent engagement is at the other. In their continuum, parent involvement and parent engagement are not synonymous, nor are they binary opposites. They simply represent what are typically “point of entry” actions to invite families into the world of education and a desired deeper level of connection, a preferred “engagement” in the learning of their children and young people.

Starting from the proposition that school-parent partnerships should lead to better outcomes for student learning and wellbeing, Goodall and Montgomery (p.404) view parent engagement in terms of “a shift in relationships” from those *between parents and schools* to those *between parents and the learning and wellbeing of their child*. This approach suggests that a cumulative process, a continuum, which respects the importance of both parent involvement and parent engagement. Goodall (2017, p.91) explains that although parent engagement is “more effective”, parent involvement is also “good” because parent involvement activities may constitute steps toward engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing.

14.2 Using the continuum to inform actions which promote family engagement

In a report prepared by ARACY (2018, p. 16) which sought the views of principals in a range of catholic primary and secondary schools, the authors sought to position practices identified by principals in an adaptation of Goodall and Montgomery's continuum. In this version of the continuum, the practices or actions of schools were grouped into four main areas:

- School culture and environment
- Connections and relationships with school
- Information and communications
- Building parent capacity and home learning

Additionally, there was indicative representation of how common or rare these actions were.

This is a useful construct, particularly in the context of this study in which numerous actions and practices suggested by the three stakeholder groups are provided as useful actions or building blocks for developing partnerships with families in **The Toolbox of actions that work in schools**.

In seeking to share the communication practices “that work” in establishing relationships with parents, the framework suggested by ARACY has been modified to provide schools with a means to determine where their actions to build partnerships with families sit in the Parent Involvement – Parent Engagement continuum. What is different about the framework below is that the findings of this small study suggest a fifth area, Parent Voice, in which schools work towards parent engagement as equal partners. The researchers have attempted to apply a broad-brush typology indicating the perceived level of parent agency involved, as suggested in the Parent Involvement – Parent Engagement Continuum.

Many of the practical initiatives utilised in the school communities which the research team visited are noted and placed in **The Toolbox of actions that work in schools** in Addendum 1. As a guide for schools, a number of the 80 + actions recorded in the **Toolbox of actions that work in schools** have been placed on the modification of the ARACY Continuum.

Figure 2: The Parent involvement – parent engagement continuum

<i>Helps answer the question: will this action/intended action likely result in improved student learning and wellbeing?</i>	Parent involvement → Parent Engagement			
	<i>Minimal parent agency</i>	<i>Developing parent agency</i>	<i>Evolving parent agency</i>	<i>High level of parent agency</i>
School culture and environment	Action 22: Picnic in the park	Action 33: You have my full attention	Action 2: Meet the family activity	Action 13: Presence – I was actually there
Connections and Relationships with school	Action 5: Parent teacher meetings	Action 49: Communication chart	Action 3: Making a phone call to every new parent	Action 2: Home visits
Information Communications	Action 36a: Traditional newsletter	Action 7: The QR welcome card	Action 57: Messaging in native language (Translating and interpreting)	Action 36: Weekly update from teacher / year level coordinator
Building parent capacity and Home learning	Action 6: Short video clip with essential start of year messages	Action 17: helping out in classrooms	Action 31: Interactive homework tasks	Action 24: Learning walks and talks for parents
Parent Voice	Action 62: Annual Google or Survey monkey survey	Action 76: Open Mic	Action 65: Expectations alignment exercise	Action 60: Action Town Hall Meetings

15. Recommendations

For schools ... to shift the focus from family involvement to family engagement:

- i) Work with families to develop a mutually beneficial connection strategy inclusive of family engagement practices that are directly connected to student learning and wellbeing.
- ii) Work with families to design communication guidelines for engagement inclusive of a school Communication chart and protocols for effective two-way communication.
- iii) Design professional learning materials and opportunities for equipping families to support and encourage their children's learning and wellbeing.
- iv) Embed family engagement as a core pillar within policy and planning in the school Strategic Plan with annual goals set by the school in consultation with families.

For providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) ... to better prepare beginning teachers to initiate and support family engagement

- i) Initiate focused collaborations between universities, schools, Catholic Education authorities and parent organisations such as CSPA to create authentic opportunities for students to engage with families.
- ii) In collaboration with the groups listed above, develop an agreed skills set and dispositions which will enable authentic family engagement.
- iii) Assess the opportunities that could be included in or replace other elements of the final teacher practicum with a view to creating meaningful experiences that will prepare graduates for family engagement.

For Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) ... to amplify the need for more rigorous preparation of teachers and school leaders for family engagement

- i) Engage with Australian Catholic University and Catholic employers to promote the narrative about authentic family engagement, with a view to influencing both ITE and Beginning teacher professional learning.
- ii) Frame a set of suitable questions to establish if candidates for Principalship possess the necessary mindset and capacity required to lead authentic family engagement in the schools.
- iii) Establish a toolkit which will assist schools to transition schools from providing family involvement activities to co-jointly designing family engagement practices.

For Catholic Education systems ... to provide substantive support for building the capacity of school leaders, teachers and families to engage in school – family partnerships which promote *Learning by the Power of 3*

- i) Establish as a priority, ways to provide substantive support for schools to support staff and families to develop effective family engagement practices
- ii) Become active partners and contributors to the narrative which positions family engagement as the appropriate support for families who are the primary and principal educators of their children.
- iii) Develop practical support for the professional learning of school leaders to strengthen family engagement.

16. Conclusion

Families have always played a pivotal role in their child's education. They are their child's first teachers, nurturing and guiding their development. National and international research has consistently shown that children whose families are engaged in their learning, have better attendance, motivation and self-belief, which leads to improved academic, social and wellbeing outcomes. Understanding how schools work with families to complement their primary role has also been a focus of research. One characteristic of highly effective schools is that they form partnerships to enhance student learning and wellbeing. This includes partnering with families (Masters, 2015).

This study set out to establish how schools build and maintain effective school-family communication with a focus on building understanding and sharing evidence about 'what works' and why it matters. From conversations with 300 parents, staff and principals across 41 Australian catholic schools, there were some clear messages:

- Communication in many forms was highly valued and contributed to building and sustaining relationships
- A mindset that values family engagement is essential to building partnerships between families and the school
- The strong ties developed with families builds partnerships that maximize student learning and contribute to staff wellbeing and efficacy as a teacher, principal and support staff.
- For families, effective communication helps to inform, reassure and engage families, which in time helps establish and sustain a strong partnership between the school staff and families.
- Partnerships with schools have the potential to help families better recognise and implement actions they could do to contribute to the learning and wellbeing of their children.
- Family engagement based on the power of three – teachers, families and students – provides the best opportunity for partnerships which enhance student learning and wellbeing.
- Effective family engagement is not a quick fix - it is the result of sustained work over time.
- Teachers who have success in connecting with families possess a guiding mindset that families are vital partners in the education of their children.

The findings are consistent with the research of Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders (2012, p. 32) who concluded that:

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.

There are numerous challenges in shaping communication to suit the needs of the ever-changing nature of families in catholic schools. To fully engage families in the learning lives of their children, a change of approach, characterised by a shift from activities that encourage family involvement to actions which build agency in family engagement is highly desirable. For CSPA, there are future opportunities to expand on this study with a focus on the preparation of beginning teachers, building capacity of existing school communities to embrace authentic family engagement and the support of communities commencing a new school where the potential for growing an engaged parent group is rich for harvest.

Used with the family involvement- family engagement continuum, **The Toolbox of Actions that work in schools** is one outcome of this study which may encourage schools to transition their efforts from involvement of families to engagement with families. This "call to action" is not a call from the wilderness, some bold exhortation to leave the familiar shores of traditional schooling. This study called on the shared wisdom of 41 Australian catholic schools and there are many more who are leaning into their parent group to build for a more sustained approach to harnessing: families, students and school staff.

ADDENDUM 1: The Toolbox of Actions that work in schools

This collection of useful actions that work in schools represents the shared experiences of schools that are actively working to enhance family engagement. While many of these actions will be familiar to most schools, there are tweaks and adaptations and some quite creative actions which schools have used with some success. These actions have been grouped under a number of themes which seemed to best describe their intended use.

The Toolbox of actions that work in schools

Action no	Action	Description and possible uses
Meet every family by Easter <i>Actions designed to reach out to all families personally early in the school year to build a relationship</i>		
1	Meet the teacher Day 1	<p>Set aside a day (often the first day of term 1) for parents/carers to come with their child into the classroom to meet with teachers</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Promote as a “getting started @ St X school in 202?” with a Coffee van and circulating staff to meet and greet</p>
2	Home Visits	<p>Offer home visits as a way of meeting and engaging with the whole family in their own familiar setting. Time is set aside after school for several weeks with no meetings scheduled to enable staff to visit several families. Staff visit in pairs and have a simple plan to engage with all members of the family.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> This idea has been used successfully in schools where a disengaged student is making a fresh start, in communities with high EALD enrolments and for ATSI families with children who were reluctant to attend school as well as teachers who were keen to connect families generally</p>
3	Meet the family activity	<p>An alternative to the home visit is the opportunity for families to come into school to work with a staff member (generally home room teacher) on a pre-prepared activity for 20 – 25 minutes. This includes an introduction (3 minutes), the activity (approx. 14 minutes), summary and close (3 minutes) and the teacher’s reflection (2 minutes).</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> One simple successful family activity is to ask each family member to talk about the origin of their name. This is shared with the teacher who also shares the origin of their name.</p>
4	Make a phone call to every new family	<p>Some schools prioritise making a phone call to every <u>new</u> family early in the year as a way of connecting early and laying the foundation for forming an ongoing working relationship with the family.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Some teachers phone every family in their class or home group early in the school year</p>
5	Parent - Teacher conversations	<p>Most schools have some form of early parent-teacher information meeting, although not always well attended, as mention of a meeting can be off putting for both teachers and parents. The idea</p>

		<p>of an early year conversation or catch-up introduces this opportunity in a less formal manner.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Some teachers have the students write an invitation, inviting both their family and their teacher to this gathering. Using the word “conversation” to replace “meeting” is a less formal approach</p>
6	Short video clips with essential messages	<p>Some teachers have taken to producing <u>short</u> video clips over the first few weeks of term to highlight essential messages traditionally featured in an information meeting.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> These clips are handy for Fly in Fly out working parents, busy parents and sole parents who cannot get to meetings. An additional option which can draw parents in is to have segments of the clip recorded by the students.</p>
7	QR welcome card	<p>As an alternative to bringing parents in for a meeting, teachers in one school produced a bookmark sized card which featured photos of the teaching team and a QR code which gave access to the information conveyed at a traditional beginning of year information night.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> This idea could be used in a variety of ways. For example, as a regular communication for highlighting current learning and how families could support that learning at home</p>
Meet every teacher by Easter <i>Actions designed to reach out to teachers personally early in the school year to build a relationship</i>		
8	Meet the teacher	<p>Joint promotion of the importance of meeting the teacher/s of your child or young person by Parent and school leaders</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Schools supported these opportunities by providing hospitality, supervised activities for children or a family activity to share with the teachers (see Action 1)</p>
9	Profile on your child to share with teachers	<p>Families invited to complete a short pre-prepared profile about their child/young person addressing their story, learning needs, interests and suggestions for how they would like to communicate with the teacher.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Some teachers completed a similar profile to share with families</p>
10	One page letter to the teacher	<p>Write a one-page letter introducing your child or young person. The letter could include some relevant family information, tips about their learning style, interests and how they are best managed when they are anxious or tired.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Suggest that this be an invitation with some prompts and way of valuing family perspectives on their children</p>
11	Best ways to contact and communicate with me	<p>Recognises that there is no one size fits all mode of communication. Invite families to suggest best modes and times for communicating.</p>

		<p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>This is also a useful way for teachers to convey the same information to families</p>
12	Find you child's teacher	<p>Some families have made it a priority to seek out teachers early in the year to simply introduce themselves and “put a face to a name”.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>See ideas in the toolbox section “It starts on the ground” for ways to make this possible.</p>
<p>It starts on the ground</p> <p><i>Some of the easiest ways for families and teachers to engage happen in the everyday</i></p>		
13	Presence ... I was actually there	<p>Examples include:</p> <p>Principals who stand near the main gate regularly (one every day she is on site to greet families, students and staff) either before or after school.</p> <p>Some schools designate certain days when staff will be present at pickup time to be available to parents, grandparents and carers.</p> <p>Some schools encourage teachers to welcome parents and carers into the classroom before school (particularly since the prohibitions in place for COVID were lifted).</p> <p>The “active” presence of school leaders and teachers at school events and functions.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>By far and away the most effective action which guarantees connection between the school and parents is the physical presence of staff “on the ground”</p> <p>Having different entry points for the school may present some challenges around rostering or rotating staff to each point.</p>
14	Catch them in the carpark	<p>Many principals and teachers have been intentional in their being present in the grounds to catch up with particular parents who may not be easy to contact</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Many principals take the time to be out and about where parents are moving and/or gathered to provide the opportunity for conversations “on the run”.</p> <p>Other options include walking out with particular students to meet their parent at pickup</p>
15	Family Gathering space	<p>Some schools have provided a central space where families can gather at drop off and pickup times. Some spaces provide hospitality, access to a rest room and a space to advertise upcoming events</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>One school has a designated “wellbeing hub” where families can access staff rostered to be available to speak with.</p> <p>With many schools having to erect high security fences, having one designated entrance that is inviting and welcoming can address the “fenced in” look.</p>
16	Picnic in the school grounds	<p>Another way of providing an opportunity for families to meet each other, staff and encourage friendships among children which may lead to play dates etc is holding picnics in the school grounds for class groups.</p> <p>Some schools use these opportunities to welcome new families, especially those who may be from EALD or ATSI families</p>

		<p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>School grounds have easy access to playground space, toilets, parking and with a little organisation, outdoor cooking or food sharing facilities.</p>
17	Help in classrooms	<p>Post covid this form of interaction has become less prevalent. Some schools have commenced making opportunities as this is an effective way for families to learn how they can support their own children in leaning at home</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>A good enticement to come into the classroom is to suggest something like “this week, we will show you ways to help with reading at home” or similar ways to assist home learning and connection to learning.</p> <p>The opportunity to reach out to grandparents who may be willing and skilled in helping out in classrooms is another option schools are exploring.</p> <p>Guidelines for class visits can be jointly developed as part of a Family Engagement strategy.</p>
<p>Start Early</p> <p><i>First encounters with schools are lasting. Parents report that actions taken by schools before their children were enrolled provide the foundation for building relationships</i></p>		
18	Pre-enrolment actions	<p>These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play groups sponsored by and at the school • Pre-prep programs conducted by school staff to support transition into school and demonstrate ways that families can support their children at school • School tours both in and out of school time and often with students as the tour guides • Opportunities to participate in sporting teams and similar events opportunities in vacation time before commencing at the school <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Besides word-of-mouth endorsement, opportunities to “try before you buy” are well worth investing time and resources as they allow families to see first-hand how schools operate and to interact with staff and other families.</p> <p># (see also suggestions re 1st responders)</p>
19	Orientation Day activities	<p>Many secondary colleges make good use of the Orientation Day for new students (mainly transitioning from primary to secondary) to build connections with students and their families. Actions include: Opportunities to participate in classes eg hospitality, media and wood tech are popular.</p> <p>Use of an Orientation Day passport which contains numerous opportunities to collect information, a passport stamp and a comprehensive but simple way to have new students traverse the school.</p> <p>Similar to the passport, is a Starter Guide which provides a “treasure hunt” format for students to find their way around the school together with handy tips about daily life at the school.</p>

		<p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Some secondary schools have the added an opportunity to bring primary students from feeder schools (particularly those in the catholic system) into the college for half and full day immersion experiences</p>
20	The enrolment process	<p>For many families and students, this process can be quite challenging. Actions by schools which help to build trust and confidence include:</p> <p>Small group enrolment sessions including some general information and Q & A for families, activities led by staff for the students; a one-on-one interview with both parent and student, a tour of the school and hospitality with opportunities to meet existing families who may be offering hospitality, discussing uniforms or simple tips that helped their family settle into the community.</p> <p>Many principals indicated that they personally interviewed and enrolled every new student.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Principals see the enrolment process as the ideal time to connect with families and new students and recognise that making the experience a pleasant and enjoyable one can set the foundation for future family engagement.</p>
21	Allocating students to classes before the school year begins	<p>Some schools provide early notice of the classes and teacher for students and their family (prior to the end of the school year). Actions to communicate this information include:</p> <p>The class teacher or home room teacher sends a personalised letter to each student providing a welcome, some information about the teacher, a map to find the classroom and some highlights of the year to come.</p> <p>One teacher also opened her classroom each morning for 20 minutes in the last week of term 4 for students already at the school and allocated to her class to come in to meet, engage in some activities and be acquainted with classroom.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Many schools adopt this early notice practice, particularly for students who may find the transition to a new school or to a new teacher challenging. Students with diverse learning needs and experiencing early anxiety benefited from this practice as part of their transition</p>
22	Picnic in the park for families	<p>Some school communities provide the opportunity for families to meet prior to the commencement of the school by sponsoring a picnic in a local park.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>These events are often planned by parent groups as part of their outreach to new families. It is also an ideal time to introduce families to a -parent WhatsApp if there is one working in the school.</p>
23	Buddies	<p>The appointment of a school buddy for new students is quite common and highly regarded by students.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>An option is to nominate a buddy prior to the commencement to the school year and enable them to meet their new buddy at the school or in a social setting in the days before school commences.</p>

		Some schools have taken on the idea of buddy families, a practice used with Defence Force families
Make it about the learning <i>Good quality practice extends communication beyond everyday information essentials, to communication which builds a more complete picture of student interests, needs, learning progress and uniqueness</i>		
24	Learning walks and talks for families	<p>This idea is an extension of the high impact strategy Learning Walks and Talks developed by Lyn Sharratt outlined in her book Clarity: what matters most in Learning, Teaching and Leading (2018). Several schools have adapted this strategy to enable families to be in classrooms with staff who could explain what students were learning and what they could do to assist their children at home with their learning.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>This idea was used in a school with a majority of EALD students whose families were given the opportunity to see firsthand how teachers worked with students in an Australian setting</p>
25	Learning information sessions and workshops	<p>An extension of the Learning Walks and Talks for families is providing families with opportunities to learn more about and workshop ways to support their children's learning at home. Many schools provide sessions about helping children to read with one teacher making short videos of herself teaching the skills to individual children and providing that video to the child's family.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>There is a very clear intention is these more "hands on" sessions for families to interact with teachers, to ask questions and provide feedback rather than being told how to do things.</p>
26	Learning conversations for the whole family	<p>This idea is similar to the Learning Walks and Talks although it adds two additional dimensions – having family members (older siblings, grandparents) in the classroom to observe and interact with their children and then an opportunity for them to talk with teachers and school leaders about what they observed, to ask questions and take ideas home to continue the learning at home.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Another option is for families to suggest topics for Learning conversations.</p>
27	Friday Learning Focus	<p>As a measure to re-engage families after a drop-off in parents coming into school, one school introduced the Friday Learning Focus where a Facebook post would feature a snapshot of particular learning focus that week as a conversation starter for families to engage with their children at home.</p> <p><u>Options</u></p> <p>The idea of providing short, sharp snapshots of learning together with some questions for families to follow up with their children or their teacher helps keep the focus on learning.</p>
28	Real Time Reporting	<p>An action gaining traction in many secondary school settings is the capacity to provide real time or progressive assessment and reporting data to families and students as a feature of many Learning Management Systems. Such features also include regular updates on student assignments, grades, attendance and achievements.</p> <p><u>Options</u></p>

		Used well in a primary school setting, Seesaw has capacity to provide a digital portfolio which enables families a point of connection and conversation with their children about their learning.
29	6 months gain strategy	<p>A strategy adopted by one school is to monitor the growth of students over a six-month period and if there is no evidence of 6 months growth over that period, families were invited into a conversation initiated by staff to address any obvious learning issues and resolve a plan moving forward.</p> <p><u>Options</u> This “no surprises” approach based on data collected over the 6-month period enables interventions to commence as soon as possible.</p>
30	Link communication to learning	<p>To keep the focus on learning and how families can support the learning of their children at home, schools have made a priority of linking as much communication to learning as possible. Classroom newsletters or weekly updates from teachers have provided good examples of providing both information about upcoming events and tips for home learning.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> In one example, the class weekly newsletter included five elements: What we are working on this week, reminders of ongoing events eg project compassion, a calendar for the week, upcoming events and several photos of students in action.</p>
31	Interactive Homework tasks	<p>Interactive homework is a home-based activity that requires discussions and interactions with families and is found to positively impact family engagement and student attitudes.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a meal from a recipe book, with short video showing major steps • Create a board game • Model making • Create a solution to an environmental problem • Rope skipping • student and parent view a YouTube clip that introduces a new topic and discuss it.
32	Parents on consultative curriculum committee	<p>Parents have been invited to join school consultative curriculum committees to provide a parent perspective and feedback about key issues associated with the Curriculum delivery, how best to communicate curriculum information to families and how best to assist with homework and other curriculum-based activities.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Options include having a designated parent on Family Engagement Groups or the school board who can provide information and a parent perspective on current curriculum issues and challenges.</p>

First Responders <i>The vital role played by front office staff, who often play the role of first responder in daily interactions with families , students, staff and members of the public cannot be underestimated</i>		
33	You have my full attention	<p>The actions of front office staff provide a window on the school as an organisation. Some of the actions which engender confidence, and a sense of welcome include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being noticed and acknowledged as someone approaches the counter (even better if the office staff member knows the name of the parent or student) • A ready smile, greeting and giving full attention to the visitor • Tone of voice and calmness of manner • Having a problem-solving mindset, readiness to resolve the question, find the right person or de-escalate heightened anxiety or emotion • Seeing and hearing staff enjoying their work and the way they talk with each other and visitors • Phone etiquette <p><u>Options</u> Walking into a school office as a newcomer, particularly someone who has had prior unpleasant experience at a school, can be quite overwhelming. The experience also reveals much about the culture of the school.</p>
34	Staff from the same or similar cultural background	<p>While not always possible, there are advantages in having staff in the front office to whom minority groups can relate. Additionally, the ready access to a staff member who speaks the language of a dominant EALD culture can enable more effective communication</p> <p><u>Options</u> Many office staff who are parents will often reflect that their experience as parent can often provide a level of confidence and trust for anxious parents and students.</p>
35	Office environment	<p>While what families hear and feel as they enter a school office can make or break any subsequent interaction with the school, what people see is also significant. Some of the actions which engender welcome, curiosity and interest include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artwork both by students and professional artists • Visuals of students in class, sport, school camps, dance etc, particularly rolling on-screen visuals updated regularly • A comfortable place to sit • Examples of religious artefacts and the charism of the school • Visual evidence that the school is organised <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Like any public space into which visitors can walk to engage with staff, the silent elements of the entry point of a building speak volumes to visitors. Good question to reflect on: do parents feel like guests as they enter the reception area?</p>
News headlines Not the one hour six o'clock news bulletin <i>Parents have a preference for information and news which helps establish their weekly routine</i>		
36	Weekly update from the teacher	<p>What works well for families is a regular (weekly preferred) communication about what is happening for their children and young people so that they can plan ahead. Actions which deliver this regular communication include:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A weekly update via email, a video clip or Seesaw which includes, events, dates, times, learning focus for the week • Communication they can rely on and know (within a few hours) exactly when to expect that communication • Streamlined headlines with clear, accurate information • Links to more details, permissions eg Consent to Go App <p><u>Options and considerations</u> In some schools, principal provide a weekly for fortnightly “Headline” communication</p>
36a	Traditional newsletter	There are many adaptations, and most schools continue to produce a school newsletter of some form
37	Change of routine communications	<p>Busy families, and families with students who can be anxious about the slightest change of routine, appreciate timely notification, using actions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending text messages • Using an electronic noticeboard which can cycle through short messages and be modified easily and quickly as the need arises • Using an A Frame white board strategically placed near the main entrance to place messages re daily changes eg relief staff • Emails to families as soon as changes are required • Messages using the Seesaw app • Using pop up messages on a variety of medium. <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many schools use text messages to update families re changed traffic conditions, late return of buses from excursions/camps, weather alerts and lockdowns.</p>
38	Day before reminders – the bracelet or wristband	<p>Teachers have used a paper and plastic bracelet (similar to hospital, music festivals and club wristbands) to insert a key reminder for children to wear home to show their family.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Hand out some spare wristbands to families to allow for short messages to be sent from home to teachers</p>
39	Daily 2-way communication	<p>Used particularly for families of primary students, schools use a variety of ways to communicate back and forth with families including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seesaw, an online remote learning and communication platform designed for teachers, students and families) used with success in many schools • Daily Diaries which both families and teacher commit to reading and making comments, if necessary, every day. • ClassDojo, another online classroom management platform and app where teachers can record and track student behaviour, facilitate classroom activities, curate student portfolios, and engage in school-to-home communication. Student sign-in is simple with a class code, QR code, or username. <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Seesaw allows families to view their child’s work, leave voice or text messages for their child, receive class announcements and exchange private messages with teachers. They can also receive alerts when their child posts new content and save their child’s work to their personal device.</p>

40	Fridge Magnet Calendar	<p>This 210 x 145 mm fridge magnet contains a calendar, list of dates to remember, a QR code with the events of the current month, the school creed and school contacts. Simple but well received.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>There could be a range of contextual information to customise such a magnet. The QR code is an additional feature which allows for more proximal information to be updated monthly</p>
Sharing the good news <i>If there is a good news story, let's tell it, rather than communicating only when there is a problem</i>		
41	Goldies	<p>Conscious of the need to acknowledge the good work and achievements of students, one secondary college pauses for ten minutes at each fortnightly staff meeting for staff to write <i>Goldies</i>, their unique award presented at year level assemblies</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>While many schools have a similar system, what sets this idea apart is making it a priority (setting aside staff meeting time) to complete the awards and how many are presented (> 1000 in one semester)</p>
42	Heads up to families re Award to child	<p>A practice common in many schools is to call families prior to their child being presented with an award to invite them to attend the school assembly. A less common practice is to video that presentation if the parents are unable to attend (eg Fi Fo and Boarding parents)</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>This is a big winner for families as they are often instrumental in supporting that student and feel their efforts are being recognised.</p>
43	Live Streaming	<p>Live streaming became more common during Covid and then in many settings was discontinued once the restrictions imposed on visitors to schools was lifted.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>For some parents (and grandparents) live streaming of school events is the only way to engage with school events. It is still used in some boarding schools and for some major events which families may not be able to attend</p>
44	Sharing the journey with a major change	<p>Many schools undergo major changes such as the addition of a new facility, a significant rebuild of the school, a school amalgamation or changes to private and public access to the school site. Some schools have turned these events into major marketing opportunities (both internal and external). Actions which invite buy-in from families include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inviting parent feedback re proposed changes • commissioning a working model for display • preparing a brochure for families outlining the major features and advantages of the project • Providing a regular update re progress. <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Families value transparency, want to know what's happening, need to be assured that the changes will benefit their children and may have expertise and feedback which can enhance the project.</p>
45	Creating authentic moments of engagement	<p>One principal highlighted a very successful strategy he termed "creating authentic moments of engagement", which were described as significant milestone celebrations and transitions highlighting growth of students as young men, rather than public</p>

		<p>“marketable” events. These moments featured the journey and achievements of students and acknowledged the contribution of students, their families and the staff.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>In another school, there is a narrative called the <i>Miracle of the Journey</i>, which acknowledges that for some students, the journey through school can be a long and winding road, but one in which no one gives up and, in the end, there is a miracle of the journey, an authentic moment of celebration for families, student and the staff.</p>
46	Podcasts	<p>Produce school specific podcasts about important topics including Subject selection information, understanding ATAR, topics of concern eg Vaping, dangers of social media etc, upcoming major changes.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Schools could seek out topics of interest for families and have staff present a short podcast to background that topic.</p>
Who’s who in the zoo <i>If “it takes a village to educate a child”,</i> <i>Families need to know who to go to in the village, what their role is and how to get in touch</i>		
47	Provide families with a list of all staff roles and contacts	<p>Families report that not knowing who to go to with an enquiry is a source of frustration in the communication stakes. Providing the list of staff that families are most likely to need to contact and a brief outline of their role is a helpful start</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>This can be enhanced with an overall school communication chart (see Idea No 51).</p>
48	Ensure that every family has a “go-to” person at the school	<p>Some schools try to ensure that every family has a staff member they can refer to, particularly around sensitive issues. While this go-to person is likely to be a class or home room teacher, circumstances may require a different person or a team such as the “care teams” who support families of children with a disability.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Promoting the notion of a first port of call (preferably the child's class or home room teacher), also requires clarity about how and when to contact that person.</p>
49	Provide families with email address of their children’s teachers	<p>Most schools do provide families with the work email address of their child’s teacher/s. The practice of sending an email to one person to read and direct to the appropriate staff is seen as a barrier to communication</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Most schools also provide some guidelines around the use of emails as a way of managing expectations and respecting the “right to disconnect” for both staff and families.</p>
50	Develop a communication protocol	<p>Many schools have seen the wisdom of developing a communication protocol to minimise the possibility of miscommunication and to establish some guidelines and expectations around this communication.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>The collaborative process involving staff, families and leadership is more likely to gain acceptance in the school community.</p>

51	Communication chart	<p>Another useful innovation is to produce a communication chart which provides a diagrammatic representation of the flow of information</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>It goes with saying that a Communications chart should be readily accessible for families and staff.</p> <p>A useful guide for parents in one school is the St X Communications Tools for 2024 and QR code link to chart: How to use SIMON everywhere app on your device and How to use PAM on your desktop</p>
52	Infographic	<p>An infographic poster is a visual that presents information from a different perspective through engaging visual elements like icons, graphs, charts, and stylish fonts. The goal of infographic posters is to simplify and bring clarity to the communication process.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Infographics have many applications in schools and break down large chunks of information into manageable pieces, making them more accessible to a wider audience. Many school documents such as Year Level and Subject information booklets are useful for this form of communication.</p>
53	Short video explanations of the channels of Communication	<p>Several schools have produced short video clips or reels to provide a “how to use the school communication channels”.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Other schools made this information available on QR codes</p>
54	Ensure that all staff are on the same page re communication	<p>One of the challenges for school leaders is to ensure that all staff are on the same page, that there is clarity about the what and the how of communication, so that there was consistency of messaging to parents and students.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>One principal who recognised the important link that the school bus drivers had with students and families extended the communication narrative to include that group.</p>
Make communication personal <i>Using an individual's name when addressing them directly is a powerful relationship-developing strategy. It conveys attention and a wish to engage personally. In formal circumstances, it denotes acceptance and admiration.</i>		
55	Know your families/ know your child's teacher	<p>An important beginning to any relationship is knowing and using a person's name. The “Meet every family/meet every teacher” suggestions are indicative of the importance of knowing about those with whom the school-family relationship is formed.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>For teachers, being the first to make contact and introduce yourself opens the door to a reciprocal approach from families.</p>
56	If in doubt, pick up the phone	<p>In making communication personal, all stakeholders in this study recommended speaking on the phone or in person was the most effective way to communicate</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>For many beginning teachers, making phone calls can be the cause of some anxiety, especially if the call is about a sensitive matter. Many schools provide a mentor, coaching and sometimes a template for such call.</p>

57	Hand out your mobile phone number ... on rare occasions!	<p>Although this practice is not usually recommended, there are times when it may be appropriate. Such times noted in this study included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in a situation where a new family experienced a natural disaster. • to a mother who herself had a disability which prevented her from attending the school. • to a family trying to deal with significant trauma (domestic violence). <p><u>Options and considerations</u> There are always the 1% occasions and events that prompt some leaders to extend a lifeline to families. Note: If a mobile number is provided to a family by a teacher or principal the instruction should be that the number has been forwarded in confidence and should not be shared with other school families.</p>
58	I want to hear it first from my child's teacher	<p>This is an action many families desire and prefer to others in the school contacting them, particularly if the contact was about a sensitive matter such as a child's behaviour. No matter what the message, parents invariably wanted to hear from their child's teacher first, amplifying the significance of the parent-teacher relationship.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> In many schools, the task of contacting families for more contentious issues rests with a senior member of the leadership or pastoral team. This is a good discussion point for schools to take up with families, possibly in the context of developing a Family Engagement strategy.</p>
59	Messaging in native language	<p>Families who have English as Another Language or Dialect value messaging using their own language. Actions taken by schools to make communication more personal for these families include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producing videos in the native language of the family. • Use of Microsoft Translator • Having staff members who are bi-lingual translate for families in conversations with staff <p><u>Options and considerations</u> In these circumstances, schools will often check with families how they wish to receive school communications, rather than make assumptions based on past experience.</p>
60	Communicating with separated families	<p>Schools recognise that there are a range of considerations and sensitivities associated with communicating with split or separated families where dual parenting arrangements are in place. Great care is needed to work through mutually agreed communication channels, based on any formal parenting plans. These are best negotiated with both parents if at all possible.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> One of the key considerations for schools is to ensure that all staff who are likely to need to communicate with parents in a separated family situation know exactly what communication arrangements have been agreed to</p>

Have you been paying attention?		
Actions which encourage parent voice in the education of their children		
61	Use of QR codes to seek feedback	<p>QR code technology provides a convenient way for schools to seek feedback from families. Using the code families can access a feedback page and submit their feedback. QR represents a quick, accessible medium to gather parent voice. Some of the applications used in school include:</p> <p>The traffic light QR process can be used to seek feedback about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a particular topic eg An information session on NAPLAN. • for gathering feedback generally on a periodic basis (eg once a term). • For gathering feedback after a trial period of some change or innovation eg a change to the newsletter format • Seeking feedback about particular events eg school sports day or Family BBQ. <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Displaying a Traffic light card at convenient locations around the school. A RED light encourages families to use the corresponding QR code to provide feedback indicating issues that they believe are not working, need to be reconsidered; AMBER is used for feedback indicating more information needed, better explanation, uncertain; while the GREEN is used to affirm, approve and accept.</p> <p>Another option is publishing small bookmark style card with a QR code referencing the school Strategic Plan or Annual Plan with the invitation: <i>We value your feedback</i></p>
62	Town Halls, Family forums and Conversations with Sally Meetings	<p>“Town Halls” are public meetings that are open to everyone. People are invited to ask questions and say what they think about specific issues. Staging a town hall meeting is a great way to communicate in-person about the issues that matter to families.</p> <p>Town Hall meetings were used effectively by a principal new to a school to encourage families to come to a gathering which included: a short presentation followed by an opportunity for families to voice suggestions. An important issue at the time of the first Town Hall was an amalgamation of several smaller schools into one larger college.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations with Sally (principal, not real name) which invite families to join the principal and discuss issues of interest and concern to them. • Family Forums which are more structured and generally have a specific focus or topic.
63	Involve the students in gathering family feedback	<p>In the search for effective ways to seek family feedback, some schools have engaged students in the process by setting a home task (or homework). Students are set the task of asking parents a limited number of response items which are recorded and returned to the school.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>There is potential for older students to be more engaged in a process of collecting data by interviewing their parents</p>
64	Google and Survey Monkey surveys	<p>Selective use of commercially available surveys provides another opportunity for seeking family views. One option for using surveys was to ask families involved in particular events to provide feedback.</p>

		<p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Schools are generally aware of “survey fatigue” and choose to use surveys selectively or to ask groups of families on a rotating basis to respond to surveys</p>
65	Coffee and Conversations	<p>Another innovative approach to engaging families to enable parent voice combines giving students a real-life experience of providing hospitality (in this case from the school café) with the meeting of families and leadership to discuss issues of interest. In one school setting, families suggested topics for these conversations and the leadership would either bring in a visiting presenter or invite a staff or leadership team member with expertise in the area nominated by families to make a short presentation and invite questions.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Another option of this format is to invite questions in advance or from the floor in a more open-ended Q & A format.</p>
66	The Kevin Rudd curb side consultation	<p>The former prime minister created interest in his inner Brisbane electorate by setting up a table, chairs and umbrella on convenient street corners for the purpose of consulting with constituents.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>This quirky idea could be well utilised in a school setting</p>
67	Expectations alignment exercise ... the power of perception checking	<p>An idea borrowed from the civil construction industry could provide a powerful insight into the ways in which families and the school staff approach many aspects of school - family communication. This process involves both groups working independently to articulate their expectations (for example about how we work with families to support their children’s learning) and then sitting together to compare expectations. Typically, the process results in deeper conversations and more informed decisions.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>This process has many possible adaptations all of which enable deeper conversations which can highlight some of the barriers to effective communication.</p>
68	Feedback on feedback	<p>Missing from many consultation processes is a “closing the loop” step which provides those who have taken the time to provide their insights with an outcome or response based on the feedback provided. Sometimes that may involve providing more clarity about an issue, providing evidence that ideas generated will be considered and implemented or making changes based on the feedback. Whatever the outcome, it is important to show that the exercise was valued, important and a necessary element of making improvements.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u></p> <p>Providing feedback to families can be humbling and demands transparency, a capacity to admit that a particular action was not fit for purpose or required a significant rethink. Such honesty and attention to the process is usually well received by families.</p>

First Impressions Physical environment <i>the messages that our families receive from the moment they arrive at the school and enter the reception area can impact how welcome they feel, how confident they are in negotiating their way around and set the visit up to be a positive experience</i>		
69	Signage that welcomes families	<p>Schools that make it easy for families to enter and engage with staff pay attention to a range of physical (attributes) including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage that ensures families know they are welcome • Signage which makes it easy to find the school reception area and other key areas of the school • Signage that uses positive language, rather than listing things people cannot do • A clear map showing how to navigate the school • Signage that makes it clear this is a catholic school. <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many schools have not been master-planned and show evidence of phases of development which may not be fully integrated and make for easy access. Having families involved in conducting an audit of the accessibility and welcome they experience as they enter the school grounds may provide food insights, for example how many signs tell visitors what they cannot do!</p>
70	Digital school sign	<p>While these digital billboards are costly, the interactive versions allow for messages to be updated regularly to keep interest and to alert families to upcoming events, changes in routine and big-ticket news items.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> These signs also provide marketing opportunities and information sharing to the general public Enrolments for Yr 7 commence shortly</p>
71	Grounds and facilities that invite Attendance	<p>Most schools do not have the luxury of huge budgets to build world class facilities. What matters is that there are well-designed, accessible buildings, playgrounds that are safe and interesting, spaces that meet the diversity of preferences and needs of students and classrooms and learning spaces which enhance learning.</p> <p><u>Options / considerations</u> Thinking about who will be welcome into the school is a good starting point: students with disabilities, children with temporary injuries, parents with prams, older family members who use walking aids.</p>
72	Maintenance	<p>People notice how well a school is maintained and indications of how hygiene and safety are prioritised. While this is a constant job in a setting where large numbers of people work and play each day, what families see, and experience should inspire confidence that the school is well maintained, and pride taken to present the school in the best possible condition.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Have a feedback “loop” to suggest changes or areas in need of attention. Some schools still conduct working bees.</p>
73	Welcome sign using every language in the school	<p>In one multi-cultural school, the welcome sign in the main car park access featured WELCOME in every language represented in the school community.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Alternate each week or around national festivals</p>

74	Students welcome to families in local Indigenous language	<p>Older students in one rural primary school were rostered each day to welcome families and visitors into the school each day including a welcome in the local First Nations languages.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> As above, could be extended to include other language groups on particular national festival days</p>
When the going gets tough for families, the tough get going <i>One of the qualities of Australians is the individual and collective capacity to respond to adversity. In the process, lifelong bonds are forged and the capacity for building relationships is exponential.</i>		
75	Deal with the issue	<p>The capacity of schools to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to issues that impact on families or the school is an indication of the strength and depth of relationships that have developed in that community. The challenges of the COVID pandemic provide a recent high stakes example of how schools were able to pivot from the normal to a very different set of circumstances.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Families valued the effort taken by some schools to provide communication about significant events which may have occurred in the school on a particular day with an indication of how the incident would be followed up and encouragement for families to talk with their children and young people about what been reported. An example was a very public “spat” between two students.</p>
76	In times of natural disaster	<p>There are many examples of schools responding to the needs of families (and of the wider community) in times of natural disaster. Schools are usually safe havens with facilities which can be made available in emergencies. Several schools in SE Queensland became Evacuation Centres for a short period in January 2011. One school in rural Tasmania responded to a lengthy bushfire season by opening a temporary school site some distance from the school in addition to keeping the main school site open. This allowed families in areas threatened by the fire event to stay off the roads and keep their children closer to home.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> In many of these scenarios, the wider school community also joined in the support process by cooking meals, providing transport, child minding and temporary accommodation.</p>
77	Responding to family trauma	<p>Numerous examples demonstrate that school communities rise to the occasion and provide support for families impacted by traumatic events, be it child minding, financial help, providing meals, transportation to appointments and counselling.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many schools have set in place arrangements to respond to family needs as they arise. Having the mindset, capacity and commitment to volunteering in such times builds community spirit.</p>
78	Sponsoring life enhancing opportunities	<p>Currently a school in one area of the country is responding to the influx of families from the Middle East, many of whom have experienced deprivation and a long and dangerous journey to Australia. This school has initiated English, cooking and citizenship classes for adults as well as play groups and a health hub for families.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Going beyond and above</p>

Building relationships ... whatever it takes <i>Here a few ideas from left field</i>		
79	Open Mic	<p>A variation on the use of QR codes (See Idea no 61 in Have you been paying attention) section. Using the QR codes with an option to record your thoughts in Red Amber or Green QR provides a quick, closing exit poll or “finger on the pulse” after a school sponsored event.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Like an open microphone scenario at comedy clubs</p>
80	The 100 club	<p>A clever idea combined the love of running, fitness, a BBQ breakfast and the gathering of staff, families and students. The 100 club operates at a primary school where every Friday morning before school, students, parents and staff run laps of the oval to accumulate 100 laps which for the students receive a coveted 100 club certificate, a sort of school version of Park Run. After the laps have been counted there is a BBQ breakfast and opportunity for conversations among families and staff. This school reports regularly having in excess of 100 parents in attendance!</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> It is worth reimagining school events for families and staff to include fun, humour, hospitality and opportunities for face-to-face connection. School events, ranging from back-to-school night to open house to parent. Family camps, Win-it-in-a-minute activities and tabloid sports offer other opportunities to being families and staff together.</p>
81	Cooking for events, the canteen and rainy days	<p>Preparing and eating food is generally a universal way to bring people together and several schools have promoted this as a way of getting people together and providing food for important events and for families need.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Multi-cultural events have also been promoted to bring families together</p>
82	House breakfasts	<p>This is a common practice in secondary schools where food becomes the catalyst for bringing people together. House breakfasts typically occur in year level family groups before school enabling families to drop in on the way to work or other commitments.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> This is idea is also well utilised for Mother’s Day and Father’s day celebrations.</p>
83	Sport	<p>The many opportunities provided by school sport for families and staff to work together as coaches, managers, drivers, supervisors etc are another way in which relationships are built.</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> In some secondary schools and schools which enrol students from middle primary years, the invitation to participate in sporting activities before commencing school has been another way of connecting with families</p>

Staff “How to” Kit <i>Staff are key communicators who frontline communicators who benefit from knowing how the school communicates with families and how to build their own capacity in communicating with families.</i>		
84	Guide to making phone calls to families	<p>Including a 5-6 step process, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Prepare notes in advance * Arrange a mutually suitable time * Start with a positive * Outline the issue to be discussed * Invite parent observations * Have some constructive options to present * Arrange a follow up which may be a face-to-face conversation * Thank parent for their participation and support; and LISTEN <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many experienced staff have suggestions from their experience of the good, the bad and the ugly conversations</p>
85	Guide to writing emails to families	<p>Key points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep it simple • Use bullet points • Make the purpose clear; personalise where possible • Provide option for further clarification • Be mindful of protocols around times to send and respond to emails; • Be mindful of Right to Disconnect arrangements. <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many experienced staff have suggestions from their experience of the good, the bad and the ugly conversations</p>
86	Staff communication guide	<p>An internal document which may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • where to communicate—and about what. ... • Build collaboration skills. ... • Talk face-to-face when you can. ... • Watch your body language and tone of voice. ... • Prioritize two-way c • ommunication. ... • Stick to facts, not stories. ... • Make sure you're speaking to the right person. <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many experienced staff have suggestions from their experience of the good, the bad and the ugly conversations</p>
87	Communication and Marketing Strategy	<p>Always a good idea for staff to be provided with a copy and opportunity to discuss</p> <p><u>Options and considerations</u> Many experienced staff have suggestions from their experience of the good, the bad and the ugly conversations</p>

ADDENDUM 2: Additional quotes from conversations in sample schools

Report section	Interview group	Quotes
3. Begin with the WHY	Teachers	<p><i>Communication is really the centerpiece of a strong school community. (Teacher, remote secondary school WA)</i></p> <p><i>(Communication) just makes everything work. Otherwise, the wheels will fall off. You need to be able to communicate with each other, and as openly and honestly as you can, which just makes for a better working and school relationship basically, between the parents and ourselves. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria]</i></p>
3.1 Communication is part of oved faith/mission	Principal	<p><i>It's really important because it's fundamental to our mission as a Catholic school, and particularly at this college, we are very keen to involve parents as partners in their children's education. (Principal, regional K – 12 College, NSW)</i></p>
	Parent	<p><i>You know the words of Mary McKillop about never seeing a need without doing something about it. That's the Josephite tradition. I like the way the school walks the talk around their faith beliefs. It gives the parents the comfort of knowing if they have a problem, they can go to the school and talk to the school about it. (Parent, regional primary school, Tasmania)</i></p>
3.2 Communication builds relationships	Teacher	<p><i>Remember that all relationships require hard work at times. (Teacher, metropolitan R – 12 College, SA)</i></p> <p><i>But it's a long process. And if you're not in it for the long process, I can see why people would leave the profession. Sometimes parents have been the big issue. But you've got to win over your parents. (Teacher, Regional Secondary college, WA).</i></p>
	Principal	<p><i>Our role is working in partnership, alongside, not in front of, but alongside families to educate their children. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p> <p><i>Good relationships are infectious. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p>
	Teacher	<p><i>I think that communication is important between parents and schools so that you build relationships. If you don't have a relationship with the parents, they're unlikely to disclose to you that the child had rough sleep, or the child is struggling in maths or if it's a tricky situation and the parent wants to block us off and doesn't trust the school or the process. But if we've got good communication and welcoming communication from the get-go, then they know that we've got their back. (Teacher, regional primary school, WA)</i></p> <p><i>Our strategic plan is very explicit around relationships and so building relationships with family doesn't happen by accident. It's certainly underpinned by the values that that we articulate here around justice, mercy, compassion, respect, those are the level</i></p>

		<i>we've defined, and have to make a lived experience. (Teacher, metro primary school, Vic)</i>
3.3 Communication the foundation for building school-parent partnerships	Parent	<i>Last year with the prep teacher, was definitely, really helpful, telling us what the goal should be that you should also be working on at home. We will be working on the same goals at the school as well (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Victoria).</i>
	Teacher	<i>It allows parents and teachers to get ahead of issues. Regular check-ins enable them to identify and address learning gaps, behaviour concerns, or other challenges early on. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Qld)</i> <i>It builds trust and a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers. When communication is open and frequent, parents feel their input is valued and they are partners in their child's education. (Teacher, regional P -12 College, Qld).</i>
4. The culture that makes parent engagement possible 4.1 First impressions: a welcoming and inclusive community	Parent	<i>The school strives to make parents feel welcome and part of the community from day one. (Parent, primary school, ACT)</i> <i>I would describe the school as being an extremely warm place. The previous principal used to speak about the school being a place of welcome and I thought that was a really apt way to describe the school. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)</i>
	Principal	<i>Parents feel more comfortable communicating with staff at this school due to a sense of community and belonging. (Principal, outer metropolitan Secondary college, WA)</i>
	Teacher	<i>People have got to be friendly, there's no communication without friendliness. That's the main thing I would say friendly and welcoming. There's no point in the office lady or a teacher looking at (a parent) with eyes that say you're an inconvenience. If you feel like you're an inconvenience to the teacher, or (any member of staff) as a parent, then it needs a cultural change. (Teacher, regional primary school, WA)</i>
4.2 Personal connections and Relationships	Principal	<i>But I think it's the one-on-one communication that the school does very well, and our staff do that very well in personalising that communication. (Principal, regional R – 12 College, SA).</i> <i>Every morning, I do before school duty, and the reason why I do that is so that I can say hello to every single child in the school. In saying hello to them, I am able to make a connection, further develop my relationship. See if they're ready to learn. and then it's part of my duty I go into each classroom and say good morning to everybody. So, by about nine o'clock, I've pretty much had an interaction with most of the staff and the students. (Principal, regional primary school, WA)</i>
	Teacher	<i>I have more morning contact with these parents who often need reassurance themselves like paying attention to first time parents who need our guidance. I bring them into morning prayer time – that works well. (Teacher, regional primary school, Qld)</i>

		<i>I upload like a little video each week of little snapshots of what we've been doing throughout the week. It's hard sometimes for kids to go home, you know, and be asked "what did you do today?"</i> (Teacher, metro primary school, WA)
	Parent	<i>We're encouraged to, if there's anything about your child, or something that's happened in the classroom, we're encouraged to reach out to the classroom teacher, which I think is really good.</i> (Parent, metro secondary college, NSW). <i>They are happy to also pick up the phone and talk and that's important to me.</i> (Parent, metropolitan primary school, Tasmania)
4.3 Open and Responsive communication	Principal	<i>It's about building that connection and getting them to get an understanding of who we are as a school and who the key people in our school community are. Just prior to the orientation day, we have a second parent information evening, where we start to get into the nitty gritty details of what college life will look like for the child, start to unpack further who those key relationships that the parents are going to have as contacts for their child.</i> (Principal, regional secondary college, Tasmania)
	Parent	<i>I think it's hard to fall through the cracks, I suppose in terms of communication and being welcoming. The principal makes a real effort to encourage parents to be engaged as much as possible in multiple things in one-on-one discussions with teachers and they make an effort to tell parents that they really love their engagement. I think the school is good at recognising that's a big part of why they're here, because they want a relationship with the parents.</i> (Parent, primary school, ACT) <i>While we do communicate well and invite parents to speak with us directly by phone about issues that we need to raise and address, our role really has been to switch the narrative around a little bit, and put out more supportive messages, just to encourage that engagement of parents and families and students to be fully informed. Parents want to be more involved but don't always know how!</i> (Teacher, regional secondary college, Tasmania)
5. Communication that builds relationships 5.1 Building trust and understanding	Teacher	<i>We're a school where our strategic plan is very explicit around relationships. Building relationships with family sets doesn't happen by accident. It's certainly underpinned by the values that that we articulate here about justice, mercy, compassion, respect, those, the level we've defined, have to make for a lived experience here.</i> (Family liaison officer, metro primary, Victoria)
	Principal	<i>I think we've got a long-standing tradition at the school that's about strong parent involvement, and building up that trust with parents, and doing everything in giving parents opportunities to be involved. From that, students thrive, because of that partnership, the communication between parents, that trust allows children to do well.</i> (Principal, regional primary school, WA)
5.2 Fostering a sense of community	Teacher	<i>Teaching is all about building relationships ... we need to take the time to reach out in whatever way it takes to build a relationship.</i> (Parent, Regional secondary college, WA).

	Parent	<i>When a child comes home and says, hey Dad, we've got this excursion or we've got this day coming up, or we've got this exam next week ... I want to know about that. I think that's super important to be informed. I think it's important that the kids know that the parents are informed. So that's one of the reasons why my daughters come to this school. I like the structure. (Parent, regional secondary college, WA)</i>
5.3 Addressing issues proactively	Teacher	<p><i>I feel that it's important to be able to inform parents of that experience, because it builds a relationship with parents. It makes them feel that they're able to come to you if there is something that they need to discuss. If your door is open, that same "come on in". I like to make sure that they know that their child is valued in the classroom, that they're valued as a parent in the classroom. Parents need to know that their voice is heard with us. (Teacher, regional primary school, WA).</i></p> <p><i>One of the reasons why I love working here is that you just know your families so much more in depth, that helps. Making the effort to get to know them, when you need to keep them informed of what's happening in the classroom, keep them informed if there's any issues that have gone on, so that the right story is presented. And it's not misconstrued so they get the facts. (Teacher, primary school, ACT).</i></p>
5.4 Know your parents	Teacher	<i>I think that (building relationships) has to be genuine, you really have to be genuinely interested in the lives of the families, not just the children, but also the families. All relationships are hard, whether it's at a school setting, whether it's your husband, your wife, your siblings, your children, all relationships require a lot of work. For young teachers it's good to let them to know that it isn't any different to any other relationship. It's just a different nature of the relationship. (Teacher, metropolitan R-12 college, SA)</i>
	Parent	<p><i>The first few weeks when teachers reached out to me to talk about how the kids were going settling into the school was what I needed. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)</i></p> <p><i>We're more likely to respond to personal communications. (Parent, metro R – 12 college, SA)</i></p> <p><i>Know who your child's teachers are, don't rely on hearsay or firing off angry emails, take the time to get to know the school staff. (Parent, regional secondary college, WA)</i></p>
	Principal	<i>I think it's the one-on-one communication that the school does very well, or our staff do very well. and personalising that communication (describes an example) The response was immediate and effective. I think our personalization of communications are important. (Principal, regional R-12 College, SA)</i>
5.5 Valuing parent voice and feedback	Principal	<p><i>There is still a desire from some parents to have more direct voice and input, beyond just being informed about school happenings. (Principal, metropolitan secondary college, Qld)</i></p>

6. School-Parent Partnerships 6.1 Partners not clients	Principal	<p><i>We've got a real belief in partnership, that it's not just about us. It's really a partnership between parents who are the first educators and who know their children and their circumstances better than anyone. We really value them as partners in this task of forming these young people. We want to do everything to get them on board to feel part of the community, to include them in the school as much as we can to hear their voice. It's really about developing trust and trust that works both ways that they trust us, but we give them a really clear message that we trust them, and we value them</i></p> <p>(Principal, metro primary school, Victoria)</p>
	Teacher	<p><i>To have a really positive growth for our students, we have to work in partnership with the parents. That starts with having that positive communication and making sure that we're all on the same page, and that we were essentially working together ... and we do that in lots of different ways.</i> (Teacher, regional primary school, NSW).</p>
	Parent	<p><i>It's a very strengths-based approach when engaging with parents about student wellbeing issues. But I actually think that the wellbeing approach underneath that is quite an intentional response.</i> (Parent, regional secondary college, NSW).</p>
7. Making it happen – if not us, then who? 7.11 Setting the tone and expectations for school-parent communication	Principal	<p><i>I let them know we trust you and we thank you for trusting us with your child and their education, that that we're doing is the best for your child. I think the more you can talk with parents, they get to know the real you.</i> (Principal, metro primary school, WA)</p> <p><i>Being out the front of my school, front and centre. We're out the front in the mornings, when you have duties in the afternoon. I asked to have a duty at the different pickup points, because there's different families at the different points and then I can connect with all my families.</i> (Principal, primary school, ACT)</p>
7.15 Modelling the importance of parent-teacher partnerships	Principal	<p><i>Being out the front of my school, front and centre. We're out the front in the mornings, when you have duties in the afternoon. I asked to have a duty at the different pickup points, because there's different families at the different points and then I can connect with all my families.</i> (Principal, primary school, ACT)</p>
7.21 Initiating and maintaining open communication	Teacher	<p><i>For most part of that partnership, it's the teacher and the student that interact on a day-to-day basis. What's happening in my classroom is relayed home so if there's concerns, then that door of communication has been opened as well. My message to parents is the school is going to support you, the school is open to allowing you to communicate, to have a say, to give you opportunities to engage or to learn, t's a partnership between three: the students, the staff, and the parents.</i> (Teacher, regional secondary college, Qld)</p>
7.24 Collaborating on strategies to support struggling students	Teacher	<p><i>If there's children disengaging, or their attendance isn't great. I think reaching out to those families, personally. We do that, there's that personal approach to not letting them slip. It's having that care and concern for each person in the community and engaging with them personally.</i> (Teacher, metro primary school, NSW)</p>

7.25 Being approachable and non-judgmental.	Teacher	<p><i>We work so hard to have the relationship where we are working in partnership. It means we're better able to deal with the challenges whether the challenges come from staff or from challenges that come from parents. A lot of the problems you hear about are where parents are fighting, feeling powerless and therefore unable to find a way to express their frustration. By building relationships we hope that somehow, they feel empowered to talk to us and engage with us to work with us not because we're sitting above them but because we're walking beside them. (Community liaison officer, Metro primary school, Victoria)</i></p> <p><i>You can give lip service to the idea of partnership. But it really does take a lot to build relationships that are built on trust. So, you have to invest in relationship building. (Community liaison officer, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p>
8. Communication that finds your parents	Principal	<p><i>One thing that was really savaged was the variability, the vagaries and the awkwardness of communication, that sometimes events could happen, but no one knew about it. And then you get lots of communications about things that weren't actually happening, you get two different stories from two different staff members. (Principal, regional P – 12 college, Qld)</i></p> <p><i>It's always about review and consultation and testing the methods in place to see which ones are becoming redundant and which ones need to be tweaked and if there's anything that needs to be changed. If you're going to be expecting parents to come and engage with the community, then you have to communicate with them about what's happening in the community and ensure that they're aware of what is happening at all times. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, ACT)</i></p>
8.1 Accessibility	Parent	<i>User-friendly digital platforms and prompt responses when parents reach out. (Parent, primary school ACT)</i>
	Principal	<i>We provide new parents with information on the various communication platforms used by the school like Seesaw and SIMON, so they understand how to engage. We explain this is the way we do communication here. If you're not sure about something, there are these QR codes where you can go and find out. (Principal, outer metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i>
8.4 Timely and consistent communication	Parent	<i>It's effective, if it's timely. If you're talking about the academic and social development of the kids you need to know, really quickly what's going on. If you don't find out fast enough, the problem gets worse. Then there's also the logistics side of things ... if it's not effective, then you don't know where to turn up to at what time, you haven't booked your diary. (Parent, metro secondary college, Victoria)</i>
	Teacher	<i>We do a regular weekly email for parents which outlines what we're focusing on for the week, our curriculum areas and important dates as well. That is done by one teacher takes it on for the term for our year level, which I think helps to alleviate some of that workload. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i>

8.5 Streamlined communication	Parent	<i>Streamline your apps. Don't make parents go on multiple apps, because it's just too much. (Parent, regional primary school, NSW)</i>
	Teacher	<i>Communication has become more complicated to the point now, where families are overloaded with information, and I don't necessarily think that where we are now is the right place with so many modes of communication available. I don't know if all the information we need is getting to the people. I find it a little bit frustrating. It's nice that there's a range of channels, however the workload that comes with that is sometimes unjustifiable. I would like it to be more streamlined. (Teacher, regional secondary college, Qld)</i>
8.7 Clear boundaries and reasonable expectations	Parent	<i>We appreciate clarity on expectations, policies, and processes related to their child's learning journey. (Parent, regional secondary college, Tasmania)</i>
9. Multiple channels of communication	Parent	<i>The school uses a number of different platforms and don't rely on just one. But the school is actually delivering access across a number of platforms to ensure that they get the best bang for the buck. It's like a cascade effect. By opening up other channels like Zoom for parent-teacher interviews, it opens up a whole other layer of access for parents. (Parent, regional secondary school, NSW)</i>
9.1 Email and newsletters	Principal	<i>We don't have a newsletter at all anymore. Years ago, we did have hard copies, then we went to purely digital and now I do a once a term principal's reflection, which is a bit like the keynotes over the course of the term. (Principal, regional secondary college, WA)</i>
	Parent	<i>If you don't read the newsletter, you won't know what's happening. But it's also your responsibility to keep on top of that as well. I think the way that they've moved electronically, that's a must. (Parent, primary school, ACT)</i>
9.2 Parent portals and learning Management Systems (LMS)	Teacher	<i>We do have Canvas, which gives us that real-time reporting on every time their child does an assessment task, they have access to that to support their child at home. (Teacher, regional secondary college, NSW)</i>
	Parent	<i>The school uses seesaw to communicate. My child's class has two teachers so it's quite useful in terms of when they do communicate, both teachers are able to communicate with us. We're also able to communicate back with the teacher. You get to start a conversation so if I need to communicate with his teachers, I'm able to so in that little chat, it's both teachers, my partner and myself. It's all in there. (Parent, regional primary school, WA.)</i>
9.4 Social Media	Principal	<i>We keep Facebook as a social media platform. We don't want parents to rely on scrolling through Facebook to get that important information when they should be on Compass.... that really important information such as excursions or events or permissions and things like that. We don't want to put that on social media. So, we keep our social media to photos and events and things like that, but and we keep Compass to that private community of the school.</i>

		(Principal, metropolitan secondary school, NSW)
	Parent	<p><i>We keep Facebook as a social media platform. We don't want parents to rely on scrolling through Facebook to get that important information when they should be on Compass.... that really important information such as excursions or events or permissions and things like that. We don't want to put that on social media. So, we keep our social media to photos and events and things like that, but and we keep Compass to that private community of the school.</i></p> <p>(Principal, metropolitan secondary school, NSW)</p>
9.5 Phone calls	Teacher	<p><i>Even if it's not my preferred form, the phone call is always the most effective. Emails are the most convenient. When you've got 50 things that you need to do often an email is easier to send but you get the most response from a phone call. You can at least leave a message; you can say very clearly what you have to say.</i> (Teacher, regional R – 12 College, SA)</p>
10. So many channels of Communication: it's time to be strategic	Principal	<p><i>It's strategic intent and intentionally rationalising communication, according to the important structures, themes and content of a working school. You could argue it's a bit reductionist, really, because we, we had a problem that we had to fix quickly.</i></p> <p>(Principal, regional P – 12 college, Qld)</p>
11. Every family has a story - insights from some priority family groups	Teacher	<p><i>Understanding background and asking parents first and allowing them to have their voice, not having parents think we're going to have a preconceived idea. Every student from any background is unique and individual. Getting their voice as well as the students would be the most important thing. It's them who are impacted. We need to hear how they see things and what they need or want from the school.</i> (Teacher, metropolitan R – 12 College, SA)</p>
11.1 Indigenous and Torres Strait families	Principal	<p><i>Generally, they get the same communication as anyone, any other parent in school. But if there are particular issues related to that specific group, then it might be an activity that is designed for the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students. We have two liaison officers at school, who communicate specifically to those families. We also have an Aboriginal education support officer on staff, so if there are any particular concerns that any of those families have, or we have with students, then we can involve those staff, and then communicating with families as well which offers a more personalised and culturally appropriate response and contact.</i></p> <p>(Principal, regional R – 12 college, SA)</p>
	Teacher	<p><i>We have authentic engagement with First Nations that then helps kids. We invite the elders to work with our kids and to run ceremonies for us, so kids get to then experience it. It's the experience they'll learn by being involved in events, having elders come into smoking ceremonies, that's experiential learning.</i></p> <p>(Teacher, regional Flexi school, Qld)</p>
11.2 Families with students	Principal	<p><i>It's a very lonely space for them. Usually, we come to know them at some stage in a fairly long process of grieving that their child has a disability, whether it's still in denial, or anger. When you sit with</i></p>

who have a disability		<p>parents where the young person has Down syndrome, whatever disabilities, and they know that their child with a disability needs a high level of care that they're struggling to meet at the moment and knowing the child is going to outlive them. That's such a fearful moment. (Principal, metro R – 12 college, SA)</p> <p>We have called stakeholder meetings that engage with private suppliers, so outside NDIS, suppliers or specialists outside of the school, once or twice a year, when they do goal reviews with us for those students. It's a roundtable with families with specialists with teachers, teacher assistants. (Principal, regional primary school, Qld)</p>
	Teacher	<p>With our inclusion teacher, the three of us would deal with that kind of communication on a daily basis. Once a term we have wrap around meetings, so we have all the services that the child has in their life to help them would come together for a debrief and conversation about where to go from now. (Teacher, regional R – 12 college, SA)</p>
	Parent	<p>They were very amazing in the way they shared anything relevant to him with me and were very open to meeting with me or chatting with me and finding out how to better support him. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)</p> <p>Good communication is of the utmost importance to me, because of my children, I have two children that are neurotypical. I feel that communication needs to be exceptional for my children to have a good education for everyone to be on the same wavelength and for the wellbeing of my children. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW).</p> <p>The teacher has been a very good source of support for me in sometimes venting, sometimes bouncing ideas back and forth, seeing if she's seeing similar behaviours within the classroom. She's offered to help me write reports, and to speak to a pediatrician to help try and get things on the right track for us. (Parent, regional primary school, WA)</p>
11.3 Families who have a child who is disengaging from school	Teacher	<p>Hands down, parents like to be informed of what's happening with their child, whether it's a phone call, face to face, coming in to have a meeting. A lot of our parents have different literacy needs themselves. They are challenged. So, to send a lot of this support stuff and information out doesn't connect with parents. They don't do it very well, they struggle to access a lot of sites that can help and so, face to face that's the go. (Teacher, regional Flexible Learning Centre, Qld)</p>
	Principal	<p>We've just introduced a Power BI program to track student absenteeism and look at trends and become more proactive in this area. It will track trends and help us to put support mechanisms in place quickly to support parents. (Principal, regional secondary college, Tasmania).</p>
11.4 Families with English as an Additional Language or	Teacher	<p>The first thing I really found difficult was that you just couldn't just pick up the phone to your parents and have a chat. That that just doesn't work, because to pick up the phone you need to get an</p>

<p>Dialect (EALD) and Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds</p>		<p><i>interpreter, an interpreter that you trust and that the community trusts. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p> <p><i>We actually know these people's situations because they trust us enough to share. For some of the families we are their first family here in Australia, so instead of going and crying on their brother or sister's doorstep, they actually present to the school and fall apart here with us to catch them. So that's how we know their stories, not because we pry, it's because they come and share it. (Receptionist, metro primary school, Victoria).</i></p> <p><i>It's giving them the time and listening to their stories and not making them feel like anything's too hard. They often come in and talk about things that are not school related. Sometimes, we say "we can help you with that". That's how you build your relationship and trust. You sort of build through knowledge of them, getting to know them, so they can talk to you about anything and trust you. (Office staff, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p> <p><i>Within the family structures, men don't necessarily play a role in the child rearing. So, to get dads here is quite challenging. The social dislocation for a refugee is harder for men than for most women, because their whole male dominated patriarchal society organization has gone. Plus, the social organisation around just the way that they interact with each other has changed. The men are the ones who are lost. (Community Liaison officer, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p>
	<p>Parent</p>	<p><i>I would love to see something in this communication area from the diocese, things like having common messages in some of those languages to be made available to the school. This would help us to communicate a little bit more effectively, because for us it's still a work in progress and we have a long way to go. (Parent, primary school, ACT)</i></p>
<p>11.5 Families from regional, rural and remote communities including Boarding School families</p>	<p>Parent</p>	<p><i>The school has to be aware that sometimes we don't always have service on our phone, or the parent may be out on a tractor in the paddock. If there's an emergency, and (the school) calls the parents, their phone may not ring. Then they will just go to the next contact as there wouldn't be any waiting around for you to ring back, because it could be 20 minutes or longer for the phone to come back. (Parent, rural primary school, NSW)</i></p> <p><i>I think they always need to have someone to answer the phone at the school. If you're remote and you've got 10 minutes at a break to make a call and you don't achieve that, they may not be able to give you an answer. (Parent, rural community school, NSW)</i></p> <p><i>The boarding staff have been fantastic at letting the parents know if there's been an incident or whether something has happened, because quite often you don't get anything from the boys. (Parent, regional secondary college, Qld)</i></p> <p><i>I also need to be able to contact the day teachers directly. (Boarding parent, regional secondary college, Qld)</i></p>

13. Additional issues and challenges 13.1 Meeting the communication needs of contemporary families	Principal	<p><i>There's been a big shift in the last 10 years around work which is number one, and not education because they might not have the time. So culturally, it's tapping into that time poor culture that we see more and more. (Principal, metropolitan primary school, NSW)</i></p> <p><i>Maybe it's a generational shift but I see a lot of people and families with both mum and dad working, and don't seem to care as much about their child's education. (Teacher, regional primary school, NSW)</i></p> <p><i>We know that to communicate well in a large and complex P-12 context, direct and clear communication about those imperatives and activities, gives parents confidence and structure. I'm a firm believer that structure liberates. I know from experience that when communication fails, it is the first chink in the armour for an effective school. It starts with parent discontent. It promotes carpark conversations, which can be quite jaundice at times. It promotes shadow cultures to develop amongst parents and then sometimes in smaller communities, amongst teachers, because often they're the same people. (Principal, regional P-12 College, Qld)</i></p>
	Teacher	<p><i>There are not so many parents on site or volunteering since Covid. (Teacher, metropolitan primary school, Victoria)</i></p>
13.2 Expectations placed on school staff	Teacher	<p><i>We are making sure that our communication is constant, as much as it can be exhausting. Communication must be constant. Especially for the families with kids who have extra needs. (Teacher, metro primary school, WA)</i></p> <p><i>There needs to be more recognition of the time involved now with that communication. I'm just communicating so much more now. I'm expected to do so much more now, and a big part of that is communication with parents about behaviour management, academic progress and pastoral matters. (Teacher, regional R – 12 college, SA)</i></p>
13.3 Communication challenges which families encounter in times of transition	Parent	<p><i>When my kids went to high school, we all struggled. My kids and us as a family struggled at first because the communication was just not on the same level as a primary school. It has taken quite a while for us to settle into how things are in high school. If I could say one thing about any high school, go above and beyond and try and connect with families, and connect with the kids. (Parent regional secondary college, Qld)</i></p> <p><i>The way the school handled the transition made it comfortable for those kids that feel a little bit anxious. There were really good things put in place to have a child of their choice in their mentor groups. They have mentor groups with students in year seven, eight and nine within the one home group. My daughter has a year nine girl in there who's taking her under her wings. (Parent, metropolitan R – 12 college, SA)</i></p>
13.4 Reaching parents who are not engaging with the school	Principal	<p><i>We're trying to understand that group and constantly asking ourselves questions about effective communication with the parents who don't have much communication with us. They are the</i></p>

		<p><i>ones that are very hard to get on board. I'm not sure what their mindset is. (Principal, regional secondary school, Qld)</i></p> <p><i>You just never know who's reading what. The right people aren't reading the things that you want them to read. The right people aren't coming to the meetings or the year level nights. That's the group that worries me. (Principal, regional primary school, NSW)</i></p> <p><i>We use a lot of options for communications because we have such a diverse student population, and therefore a diverse parent representation. We need to get really creative about how we do that. It's through lots of different avenues including telling the kids about and trying to get the message home by students as well. Those disengaged families and the more vulnerable families are able to come to the school and be involved in that way. (Principal, regional K -12 college, WA)</i></p>
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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Parent Interview questions

PARENT QUESTIONS	
Number Purpose / key words	Interview Questions
1. Opening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Let's start by asking you: Why is it important for you to have effective school - parent communication? What are some of the things that this school does particularly well when it comes to school - parent communication? What is it about the culture of the school community that has helped to build effective School - Parent communication? [Beliefs, mindset, routines, relationships etc]
2. Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> What makes communication effective at this school? (if already answered previously, then "Is there anything else that makes communication effective at this school?") In your experience, what makes communication effective <u>when there is a lot of diversity in family groups</u>? Does your family identify with any of the following groups? [USE PARENT QUESTION PROMPTS] <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous and Torres Strait families Families with students who have a disability Families who have a child who is disengaging from school Families with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) Families from regional, rural and remote communities including Boarding School families; and Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. <p>If yes, what are the key things the school should consider when communicating to this group?</p>
3. Strategies To enable Parent Communication and Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Is there one strategy that stands out which is working particularly well? Is there anything in particular you can remember which <u>the school did before your child/ren was/were enrolled</u> which has helped lay the foundation for effective communication?
4. What can you bring to the process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> For you, what can make communication between the school and parents <u>a genuinely Two-Way process</u>? Are there any ways in which parents communicate with each other that have added value to what the school is doing to build effective School-Parent communication?
5. Building effective communication Journey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are there key milestones or things that have been done in the school community in the past that have improved school - parent communication? What do you think are some of the <u>biggest challenges</u> are when building effective school - parent comms?
6. Effectiveness in Information Sharing	<p>I'd like to focus for a few moments on <u>Information sharing at his school ...</u> Can you look at this list of ways that schools communicate information (sometimes called channels of communication). SHOW PARTICIPANTS THE PREPARED LIST</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Firstly, is there anything missing that your school uses?

	<p>2. From this list of ways that the school communicates information to you (and any other ways you may have named) what are the ways that work best for you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Website ✓ Newsletter – hardcopy ✓ Newsletter - digital ✓ Weekly/regular emails from teachers to their class or PC group ✓ Parent Teacher Information sessions ✓ Subject information booklets ✓ Parent Portal or similar eg Compass, ✓ Particular Apps used by the school eg WhatsApp ✓ Occasional items distributed by the school eg <i>Understanding NAPLAN</i> ✓ General text messages to parents eg reminders ✓ Text messages to individual parents ✓ Social Media: Facebook ✓ Social Media: Instagram ✓ Other, please elaborate ... <p>3. Of the ways that you've named, what is the most effective way for you?</p>
7. Particular challenges that may come from working through sensitive issues.	<p>So, we've just talked about Information sharing... I'd like to turn your mind to the more personal interactions you have with the school about Wellbeing, behaviour, family circumstances, Learning ...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are there any issues / topics of communication with the school that are more challenging than others? 2. How do you approach that topic with the school?
8. Improvements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If there was any one other action or strategy which would enhance or improve this communication, what would it be?
9. Sharing your wisdom with others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you could share your experience with other parents, what would you say are the most important things to get right in having effective parent/school comms?
9 ITE / Induction [Preparing Teachers for School – Home Communication]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you think of a staff member who is very effective with School – Parent communication: What do they do which makes them effective?
10. Final questions	<p>This is your chance now to share with us anything else you think is important to this conversation about School – Parent communication that we may have missed ...</p>
11. Closure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you satisfied that the information you have provided accurately reflects your views and experiences? 2. Is there any information you have provided which may need to be additionally changed in order to ensure that your participation remains anonymous? 3. And finally, are you willing for the interview to be transcribed, anonymised and used for research purposes? <p>Thank you for your participation in this Project</p>

APPENDIX B: Teacher interview questions

TEACHER QUESTIONS	
Number Purpose / key words	Interview Questions
1. Opening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Let's start by asking you: Why do you think it's considered important to have effective school/parent communication? [If building relationships is mentioned ...] What are some of the things you do to build that relationship with parents? What do you find is working particularly well when it comes to school - parent communication? What is it about the culture of the school community that has helped to build effective School - Parent communication? [Beliefs, mindset, routines, relationships etc]
2. Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> What makes communication effective at this school? (if already answered previously, then "Is there anything else that makes communication effective at this school?") In your experience, what makes communication effective <u>when there is a lot of diversity in family groups?</u> I'd like you to focus on this list of different family groups within your classes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous and Torres Strait families Families with students who have a disability Families who have a child who is disengaging from school Families with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) Families from regional, rural and remote communities including Boarding School families; and Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Could you choose a few of these groups to respond to this question: What are the key considerations the school should consider when communicating to these groups?
3. Strategies To enable Parent Communication and Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Is there anything in particular that your school does which sets the foundation for effective communication <u>even before students are enrolled here?</u>
4. What do you bring to the process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are there any particular actions you take personally to create a school culture which enables effective communication between the school and parents? For you, what can make communication between the school and parents a <u>genuinely Two-Way process?</u>
5. Building effective communication Journey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are there key milestones or things that have been done in the school community in the past that have improved school - parent communication? What do you think are some of the biggest challenges when building effective school/parent comms? Are there any ways in which parents communicate with each other that have added value to what the school is doing to build effective School-Parent communication?
6. Effectiveness in Information Sharing	<p>I'd like to focus for a few moments on <u>Information sharing at this school ...</u> Can you look at this list of ways that schools communicate information (sometimes called channels of communication). SHOW PARTICIPANTS THE PREPARED LIST</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Website ✓ Newsletter – hardcopy ✓ Newsletter - digital ✓ Weekly/regular emails from teachers to their class or PC group ✓ Parent Teacher Information sessions ✓ Subject information booklets ✓ Parent Portal eg Compass, Orbit ✓ Particular Apps used by the school eg WhatsApp ✓ Occasional items distributed by the school eg <i>Understanding NAPLAN</i> ✓ General text messages to parents eg reminders ✓ Text messages to individual parents ✓ Social Media: Facebook ✓ Social Media: Instagram ✓ Other, please elaborate ... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. First of all, is there anything missing that your school uses? 2. From this list of ways that the school communicates information to parents (and any other ways you may have named) what are the ways that work best for the school?
7. Particular challenges that may come from working through sensitive topics.	<p>So, we've just talked about Information sharing... I'd like to turn your mind to the more personal interactions you have with the parents about re Wellbeing, behaviour, family circumstances, Learning ...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are there any issues / topics of communication with parents that are more challenging than others? 2. How do you approach those sensitive / challenging conversations with parents? 3. What have learned you about what works best from these more personal and possibly sensitive interactions with parents?
8. Improvements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If there was any one other action or strategy which would enhance or improve this communication, what would it be?
9. Sharing your wisdom with others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you could share your experience with other schools, what would you say are the most important things to get right in having effective parent/school comms?
9 ITE / Induction [Preparing Teachers for School – Home Communication]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you experience in your ITE which prepared for communicating with parents? 2. Do you think teachers have been well prepared for this aspect of professional practice? Why or why not? 3. What suggestions do you have for universities for preparing teachers for engaging effectively with parents? 4. Did your initial induction of new staff at this school include Parent – School Communication: policy/strategies/expectations? What were the key messages?
10. Final questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is your chance now to share with us anything else you think is important to this conversation about School – Parent communication that we may have missed ... <p>OR: Is there a question here we should have asked?</p>
11. Closure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you satisfied that the information you have provided accurately reflects your views and experiences? 2. Is there any information you have provided which may need to be additionally changed in order to ensure that your participation remains anonymous? 3. And finally, are you willing for the interview to be transcribed, anonymised and used for research purposes? <p>Thank you for your participation in this Project</p>

APPENDIX C: Principal interview questions

PRINCIPAL QUESTIONS	
Number Purpose / key words	Interview Questions
1. Opening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Let's start by asking you: Why is it considered important to have effective school/parent communication? What do you find is working particularly well when it comes to school - parent communication? What is it about the culture of the school community that has helped to build effective School - Parent communication? [Beliefs, mindset, routines, relationships etc] What do you think some of the biggest challenges when building effective school/parent comms?
2. Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> What makes communication effective at this school? (if already answered previously, then "Is there anything else that makes communication effective at this school?") In your experience, what makes communication effective <u>when there is a lot of diversity in family groups?</u> I'd like you to focus on this list of different family groups within the school? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous and Torres Strait families Families with students who have a disability Families who have a child who is disengaging from school Families with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) Families from regional, rural and remote communities including Boarding School families; and Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. <p>Could you choose a few of these groups to respond to this question: What are the key considerations the school has when communicating to these families?</p>
3. Strategies To enable Parent Communication and Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Is there one strategy that stands out which is working particularly well? Is there anything in particular that your school does which sets the foundation for effective communication even before students are enrolled here?
4. What do you bring to the process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are there any particular actions you take personally to create a school culture which enables effective communication between the school and parents? For you, what can make communication between the school and parents a genuinely Two-Way process? Are there any ways in which parents communicate with each other that have added value to what the school is doing to build effective School-Parent communication? What do make of that form of communication?
5. Building effective communication Journey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are there key milestones in the school community in the past that have improved school - parent communication? Can you comment on the effectiveness of these changes? Are there any ways in which parents communicate with each other that have added value to what the school is doing to build effective School-Parent communication?
6. Effectiveness in Information Sharing	<p>I'd like to focus for a few moments on <u>Information sharing at his school ...</u></p> <p>Can you look at this list of ways that schools communicate information (sometimes called channels of communication).</p>

	<p>SHOW PREPARED LIST</p> <p>1. From this list of ways that the school communicates information to parents (and any other ways you may have named) what are the ways that work best for the school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Website ✓ Newsletter – hardcopy ✓ Newsletter - digital ✓ Weekly/regular emails from teachers to their class or PC group ✓ Parent Teacher Information sessions ✓ Subject information booklets ✓ Parent Portal eg Compass, Orbit ✓ Particular Apps used by the school eg WhatsApp ✓ Occasional items distributed by the school eg <i>Understanding NAPLAN</i> ✓ General text messages to parents eg reminders ✓ Text messages to individual parents ✓ Social Media: Facebook ✓ Social Media: Instagram ✓ Other, please elaborate ... <p>2. Of the ways that you've named, what is the most effective way for the school? For parents?</p>
7. Particular challenges that may come from working through sensitive topics.	<p>So, we've just talked about Information sharing... I'd like to turn your mind to the more personal interactions you have with the parents about re Wellbeing, behaviour, family circumstances, Learning ...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are there any elements / topics of communication with parents that are more challenging than others? 2. How do you approach those sensitive / challenging conversations with parents? 3. What have learned you about what works best from these more personal and possibly sensitive interactions with parents? 4. What works best in terms of giving parents a voice at this school?
8. Improvements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If there was any one <u>other action or strategy</u> which would enhance or improve this communication, what would it be?
9. Sharing your wisdom with others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you could share your experience with other schools, what would you say are the most important things to get right in having effective parent/school comms?
9 ITE / Induction [Preparing Teachers for School – Home Communication]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you think your staff have experienced in their ITE which prepared them for communicating with parents? 2. Do you think teachers have been well prepared for this aspect of professional practice? Why or why not? 3. What suggestions do you have for universities for preparing teachers for engaging effectively with parents? 4. Did your initial induction of new staff at this school include Parent – School Communication: policy/strategies/expectations? What were the key messages? 5. Can you think of a staff member who is very effective with School – Parent communication: What do they do which makes them effective?
10. Final questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is your chance now to share with us anything else you think is important to this conversation about School – Parent communication that we may have missed ...What didn't I ask that you think I should have asked?

11. Closure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you satisfied that the information you have provided accurately reflects your views and experiences? 2. Is there any information you have provided which may need to be additionally changed in order to ensure that your participation remains anonymous? 3. And finally, are you willing for the interview to be transcribed, anonymised and used for research purposes? <p>Thank you for your participation in this Project</p>
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APPENDIX D: Australian Catholic University course: EDES302 Professional Communication

Course/Unit: EDES302 - *Professional Communication*

Institution: Australian Catholic University (ACU)

Description: EDES302 is designed to enhance students' skills in professional communication within educational settings. The unit focuses on developing effective communication techniques for interacting with colleagues, students, and the wider school community.

Key Topics:

- Principles of professional communication
- Strategies for effective verbal and non-verbal communication
- Writing professional documents and reports
- Conducting effective meetings and presentations
- Navigating communication challenges in educational contexts

Learning Outcomes: Students will learn to apply communication strategies effectively in various professional scenarios, improving their ability to convey information clearly, collaborate with others, and address communication challenges in educational environments.

Assessment: Assessment methods include written assignments, presentations, and practical exercises designed to demonstrate proficiency in professional communication skills.

APPENDIX E: Other University ITE courses in parent engagement / communication

In Australia, universities offer various courses and units designed to prepare teachers for effective parent engagement and communication. These courses often focus on building strong partnerships between schools and families to enhance student outcomes. Below is a brief outline of some of these offerings:

1. University of Melbourne

Course/Unit: EDU2PCE - *Partnering with Parents and Carers*

Description: This unit is part of the Bachelor of Education program and focuses on developing skills for effective communication and collaboration with parents and carers. It covers strategies for building positive relationships, understanding diverse family backgrounds, and involving parents in the educational process.

Key Topics:

- Communication strategies for engaging parents
- Understanding and addressing diverse family needs
- Developing partnership models with families
- Effective parent-teacher meetings

2. University of Sydney

Course/Unit: EDD6163 - *Family and Community Engagement in Education*

Description: This unit is offered in the Master of Education program and explores theories and practices related to family and community engagement. It provides educators with tools to foster collaborative relationships with families and communities to support student learning and well-being.

Key Topics:

- Theoretical frameworks for family and community engagement
- Strategies for involving families in educational activities
- Building community partnerships
- Addressing challenges in family-school relationships

3. Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

Course/Unit: EDD612 - *Engaging Families and Communities*

Description: Part of the Master of Education program, this unit examines the role of families and communities in supporting student learning. It emphasizes practical approaches for teachers to engage with parents and leverage community resources.

Key Topics:

- Effective communication with parents and caregivers
- Strategies for involving families in school events
- Building and maintaining strong community links
- Case studies of successful family-school partnerships

4. University of Western Australia (UWA)

Course/Unit: EDUC5910 - *School and Community Partnerships*

Description: This unit, offered in the Master of Education program, focuses on developing skills for creating and maintaining school-community partnerships. It addresses the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities to enhance educational outcomes.

Key Topics:

- Developing and sustaining school-community partnerships
- Strategies for effective parent engagement
- Community resources and their impact on education
- Addressing barriers to effective family-school collaboration

5. University of South Australia (UniSA)

Course/Unit: EDC104 - *Families, Schools, and Communities*

Description: Part of the Bachelor of Education program, this unit provides insights into how teachers can effectively engage with families and communities. It emphasizes practical strategies and theoretical knowledge to enhance family-school relationships.

Key Topics:

- Principles of family-school partnerships
- Communication techniques for diverse families
- Involving parents in the educational process
- Evaluating the impact of family engagement on student achievement

These courses and units equip future educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to build strong, collaborative relationships with parents and caregivers, ultimately aiming to create a supportive educational environment that fosters student success.

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