

SUBMISSION

TO

**PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION:
SCHOOLS WORKFORCE STUDY**

19TH AUGUST 2011



**AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL INC.
PO Box 5011, Launceston, TAS 7250
Phone: (03) 6334 8886**

**Submission
by the
Australian Parents Council
August 2011**

Productivity Commission: Schools Workforce Study

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the national organisation representing the parents of students attending non-government schools. In this context the word 'parent' includes carers and legal guardians.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process in relation to the Schools Workforce Study.

The four key goals which underpin APC's principles and activities are Choice, Quality, Equity and Parental Voice in education. This submission is underpinned by the following key principles:

- ✓ Parents are the primary educators of their children;
- ✓ All students have a right to access and receive a quality education to enable them to attain their potential; and
- ✓ Effective partnerships are central to the success of schooling outcomes.

Issues Paper

APC notes the following comment in the Issues Paper (p6): "Also, a significant number of volunteers (predominantly parents) assist with the running of school councils/boards and with some school services.

"All of these groups play important roles in the provision of education to children in Australian schools. However, in keeping with the emphasis in the terms of reference, this study will be mainly focused on those who support the practice of teaching, especially teachers, principals and other managers, and teaching assistants."

APC strongly argues against this approach, which effectively places parents at the periphery of the schooling enterprise. Parents must be at the core of considerations of the operation of the schools workforce and its purpose. In this paper we outline the breadth and extent of the contribution that parents make to both the educative and organisational aspects of schooling and in so doing contend that by omitting the influence of parents and other volunteers from the work of 'those who support the practice of teaching' a pivotal plank in effective teaching and learning and effective schools is ignored.

Schools Workforce

Schools exist primarily to support parents with the education of their children and to fulfil society's expectation that all young people will be developed in such ways as will enable them to be active citizens and to make positive contributions to their communities.

A school cannot be expected to meet those obligations if its leaders, teachers and key support staff do not engage meaningfully with parents, or if the school fails to integrate with the community of which it is a part.

A school's workforce is comprised of several elements, all of which are critical to its success as an educational institution where all students can expect to receive a quality education to enable them to attain their potential. These elements include:

- Appropriately formed, competent school leadership, encompassing the educational and 'business' aspects of a school's operations;
- A highly skilled, reflective and creative teaching staff who can adapt to evolving professional practices and technologies;
- Well trained teaching support staff;
- Competent administrative and ancillary staff;
- Parents and other 'friends' of the school who volunteer their time and skills to support the school to enable it to provide a diverse range of support and activities for students that would be beyond the means of the school to otherwise provide. In addition, parents of students and the student's family context hold the key to 60 per cent of the variation in student learning outcomes¹; and
- A network of community and specialist service providers who can assist with the provision of services that fall outside those that in-school staff can reasonably be expected to provide.

All people who are a part of the school's workforce and support groups must be able to complement and share in the school's mission, culture and ethos and to work collegially and in a culture of mutual recognition and respect.

Parents are most often the people who know their children best and who are best placed to support schools in the education of their children. All too often consideration in respect of a school's workforce is limited to the traditional work of school leadership and teaching staff.

It is APC's contention that schools can be more effective if their leaders and teachers are able to perform their professional roles within a well structured and efficient professional environment that enables the needs of all students to be identified and met in cooperation with their families, either within the school or with the assistance of outside support.

This submission focuses upon the needs for:

- i. school leaders, teachers and key school support staff to have the knowledge, skills and confidence to carry out their professional roles with a true sense of partnering with the parents of their students; and

¹ Hattie, J. (2003). Teachers make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence? University of Auckland, Australian Council of Educational Research.

- ii. the notion of 'schools workforce' that encompasses the full range of community supports and services that are necessary to ensure that the needs of all students can be reasonably met and for school staff to have the knowledge, skills and resources to be able to access those supports and services for their students.

Parental Engagement and the Education Reform Agenda

Meaningful engagement between parents and the teachers and school leaders in whose hands they entrust their children to be schooled is a critical element of school reform.

In Australia a parental engagement strategy is supported by the COAG National Educational Plan, which identifies "*Boosting Parental Engagement*" in schooling as a key policy and reform direction. It is also supported by the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians, which commits to developing stronger partnerships between parents/families/carers/communities and schools. The National *Family-School Partnership Framework*² also emphasises that schools need to recognise the primary role of the family in education and advocates for families and schools to work together in partnership.

In overseas jurisdictions parental engagement is being embedded into educational policies and reforms. For example in 2009 the USA created a National Family, School and Community Engagement Working Group, to inform the development and implementation of federal policy related to family, school and community engagement. Another example can be found in Ontario, Canada where in 2010 the Minister of Education introduced the first comprehensive parent engagement policy in schools.³

Parental engagement is evident in some worthwhile individual programs and projects throughout Australia but APC proposes that Australia should aspire to the systematic and sustainable integration of parental engagement into all aspects of the reform agenda.

Policies and practices that enable this strategic approach to parental engagement must be a part of schools workforce reforms. Studies confirm that when teachers understand parents and communicate and build relationships with them, students benefit⁴. Recent research into parent engagement programs in Australia also shows that such programs are not only effective in terms of student outcomes, but that the programs have wider and lasting benefits for parents, teachers and the community which feed directly into improvements in the life quality and economic wellbeing of individuals, the social capital of communities and the fortunes of the economy generally⁵.

Strong, positive relationships with parents also play a role in retaining teachers, as teachers are more likely to stay in schools where there are high levels of trust with parents, and where teachers feel that parents support their work and respect them and their own professional practice is strengthened by working in partnership with families.

² Australian Government (2008). *Family-Schools Partnership Framework*. Commonwealth of Australia.

³ Ministry of Education (2010). *Parents in Partnership, A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools*. Ontario, Canada.

⁴ Caspe, M., Lopez, M.E., Chu, A. & Weiss, H.B. (2011). *Teaching the Teachers: Preparing Educators to Engage Families for Student Achievement*. Issue Brief. May. National PTA & Harvard Family Research Project.

⁵ Australian Parents Council. (2009) *Parental Engagement: Social and Economic Effects*.

The importance of trust between school stakeholders is evident from a World Bank working paper in 2006⁶ which suggests that one of the six factors that contributes to the success of the Finnish education system is the culture of trust, i.e. the belief that teachers together with principals, parents and their communities know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth.

A study conducted by APC⁷ found that for many parents the sense of partnership, or lack of it, turns on whether the school and the teachers recognise them as the primary educators of their children and treat them accordingly.

The study found that parents judge this by:

- the quality of interactions they have with the school;
- the ease with which they can gain access to teachers and principals if they wish;
- the responsiveness of the school to their wishes or concerns, and
- the extent to which they receive early notice of any issues arising about their child.

Parents who feel well treated in these matters say they do feel as if they are partners. Conversely, parents who do not feel well treated in these matters do not feel as if they are partners.

At the other extreme, some parents have had the experience of being told by the school that so long as the child is in the school grounds, he or she is solely the school's responsibility and that the parents will be notified of any matter should the school regard it as necessary.

There is good recent evidence in Australia that the employment of paid parent liaison officers by schools is one of the most effective strategies in strengthening and sustaining parental engagement.

As part of the development of the National Family-School Partnerships Framework, a national project was conducted which saw the Australian Government provide grants of \$10,000 each to 61 schools to trial a family-school partnership project of their choosing. A key finding of that project was: "If there was a single most critical use for the money, it was the employment of a parent liaison officer. This was invariably part-time, but in the nature of these things the time given by the person tended to stretch well beyond the time paid for. In that sense, the schools got very good value for money."⁸

The Smarter Schools National Partnerships Key Reform Project: Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low SES Communities, which is currently in development and is due for release in late 2011, provides further support for these findings.

School budgets do not generally allow for initiatives of this kind. APC has therefore argued in its submissions to the current Review of Funding for Schooling that, "A pool of funds should be established and made available to school communities for projects and programs to

⁶ Aho, E., Pitkanen, K. & Sahlberg, P. (2006). Policy Development and Reform Principles of Basic and Secondary Education in Finland since 1968. The World Bank Education Working Paper Series, Number -2.

⁷ Australian Parents Council (2008) Values and Other Issues in the Education of Young Australians.

⁸ Saulwick Muller Social Research. (2006). Family-School Partnerships Project. Prepared for the Department of Education, Science & Training; the Australian Council of State School Organisations; and the Australian Parents Council.

engage parents in active participation in their children's schooling in accordance with the National Framework for Family-School Partnerships."⁹

Parental Engagement and Workforce Professional Development

In the 21st century parental engagement modules need to be offered in universities to fully prepare teachers to deal with the reality of communicating and working with parents to raise student achievement. Teachers need to develop skills and practices in parental engagement and these skills are more likely to be imparted when parental engagement is embedded in a system of training and professional learning. A recent research paper¹⁰ details a number of ways that this might be achieved and which are relevant to the Australian context:

- Support the development of standards for teacher knowledge and skills in parental engagement so that higher education institutions, schools and other stakeholders can adequately prepare teachers in this area.

APC and the Australian Council of State School Organisations, which represents the parents of students attending government schools, are jointly conducting a pilot study to trial the use of aspects of the National Professional Standards for Teachers. Titled *Parental Engagement: enriched teaching for effective learning*, the study is focused on the two standards which define the knowledge and skills necessary across teaching careers for the engagement of parents and carers in the educative process (Standard 3.7) and engagement with parents and carers (Standard 7.3).

The primary aim of the study is to identify the common practices of teachers and school leaders at each career stage that lead to effective parental engagement to support student learning.

- Ensure that the curriculum directly addresses the skills and knowledge that teachers need to possess for parental engagement in practice.

In APC's recent submission to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's General Capabilities Consultation we argued that there is a need for schools to be encouraged and enabled to engage with parents and to work in partnership with families to build and develop the general capabilities in children and young people. In particular, materials and other supports should be developed that will build the capacity of parents to understand and engage with what schools are doing in implementing the general capabilities within the Australian Curriculum.

- Support collaborations between training institutions, schools, parents and other stakeholders to ensure that policies and procedures are in place to provide prospective teachers with field placements that enable them to learn about exemplary parental engagement practices. Support the placement of infrastructure to conduct research and share best practice and strategies for parental engagement with curriculum developers and current and future teachers.
- Ensure that pre-service education around parental engagement is available for teachers as well as continuing education and professional development for practising teachers about the impact of parental engagement on student success. Workplace practicums

⁹ Australian Parents Council. (2011). Response to the Emerging Issues Paper. Submission on the 2010 Emerging Issues Paper to the Australian Government's Review of Funding for Schooling.

¹⁰ Caspe, M., Lopez, M.E., Chu, A. & Weiss, H.B. (2011). Teaching the Teachers: Preparing Educators to Engage Families for Student Achievement. Issue Brief. May. National PTA & Harvard Family Research Project.

should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities and experiences of working collaboratively with parents.

- Ensure that evaluation of data on parental engagement is documented so that information is available about how teachers can best partner with parents, where teachers need support in the area of parental engagement, and to help with any redesign of training and professional development for teachers in relation to parental engagement.

Australian teachers support the provision of professional development and training in parental engagement as evidenced by a report commissioned by DEEWR in 2008. This report mapped the policies and practices of teacher professional learning in Australia and provided guidelines for quality professional learning into the future. In the report, *National Mapping of Teacher Professional Learning Project* by the Monash University Faculty of Education, teachers identified parent and community involvement as their main area of need for professional development (82% of surveyed teachers). This item had such a large proportion of responses that it outweighed the next identified area of need by almost 60%.

Parental Engagement and School Leadership

A paper¹¹ published by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership in July 2011 stated, “there is unequivocal acceptance in the literature we have reviewed that leadership plays a key role in improving schools and raising student achievement,” and, “‘next practice’ should ensure that school leaders acquire a repertoire of strategies to pursue these goals”.

One of the five professional practices of principals set out in the National Professional Standards for Principals, endorsed by Ministers on 8 July 2011, is “engaging and working with the community”. This practice includes engaging with families and carers; actively seeking feedback from families and carers about the quality of learning and their ambition for education; and creating and maintaining effective partnerships with families and carers to support and improve students’ achievement and personal development.

Reference was made earlier in this submission to the national project that was conducted as part of the development of the National Family-School Partnership Framework.¹² Another key finding from that project was, “The school principal is the single most important factor in achieving best practice. Where the Principal is visionary, perceptive, creative, committed, open, patient and capable of leading with humility and humanity, the partnership ideal flourishes. These paragons exist. They are there in the 12 case studies and in many other schools besides.

“Their secret appears to be a capacity to empower others; to recognise that good ideas can come from others; to take the attitude that “you have to have a fair dinkum crack” (as one so potently expressed it); to be able to empathise with others, especially people in hardship or difficulty, and to do all this without losing their natural authority. Genuine leadership, in other words.

¹¹ Dempster, N., Lovett, S. & Fluckiger, B. (2011) *Strategies to develop school leadership: A select literature review*. AITSL

¹² Saulwick Muller Social Research. (2006). *Family-School Partnerships Project*. Prepared for the Department of Education, Science & Training; the Australian Council of State School Organisations; and the Australian Parents Council.

“However, principals are to some extent the product of their own training and of the culture of the larger organisation within which they work. Some school systems are more flexible than others. Some have devolved more power to principals than have others. Some have sought to promote managerial qualities in principals and some have not. Some are readier than others to recognise the wider role schools and principals are being asked to play, though additional resourcing seldom if ever accompanies this recognition. All these factors, in addition to personal disposition, play a part in determining the extent to which principals are able and willing to value the partnership ideal and give effect to it.”

APC would like to see leadership programs for school principals that provide more instruction and field experience in parental and community engagement so that principals may excel in shaping school cultures that engage teachers, families and communities in meaningful ways. APC advocates for:

- More training for principals in interpersonal skills that enable principals to share leadership and engage families, staff and community as educational partners.
- More training for principals to gain knowledge and skills for effectively working with students, as well as parents and communities, who represent numerous ethnicities, races, cultures and religions. Principals must be able to understand the influence of these and other factors on learning and be aware of and understand the patterns of discrimination, inequality and injustice.
- More training about community, collaborative strategies and parental engagement to help principals understand the structure, function and politics of communities.

Parental Engagement and Equity

Achievement gaps for minority and low-income students persist and there is growing evidence to show that parental engagement plays an instrumental part in eliminating them.

The OECD has developed ten practical steps that governments can take to enhance equity in education¹³ and one of these is to strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn.

APC conducts the highly successful *Indigenous Parent Factor: Successful learning in the early years at home and school* (IPF) program. Through the IPF program APC reaches out to Indigenous parents with the aim to positively influence home learning and consequently improve Indigenous children’s chances of a successful start in the early years of schooling.

The program is based on key principles, including: parents are the first and continuing educators of their children; the first few years of a child’s development are crucial in setting the foundation for life long learning; and all young Indigenous people have the capacity to learn.

The program was designed in collaboration with Indigenous communities, elders and educators to foster the partnership between home and school in support of Indigenous children’s successful learning and literacy development, successful entry into school learning and participation in school life. Indigenous elders and educators continue to be closely involved in monitoring, evaluating and shaping the program.

¹³ OECD. (2008). Ten Steps to Equity in Education. OECD Policy Brief. January 2008.

The program was the subject of a major independent evaluation in 2007¹⁴ which found it was effective, appropriate and efficient:

- ✓ It was judged to be *effective* in that it contributed to increases in parent knowledge of, and participation in pre-school and school education and improved linkages with the school and other community services;
- ✓ It was *appropriate* as it had been designed in substantial consultation with Indigenous people, used a workshop format which was culturally appropriate, and materials suited to Indigenous people. It was noted that the materials received the highest praise from all Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons interviewed because they took into account Indigenous methods of learning, used suitable (jargon-free) language and allowed for flexibility in delivery; and
- ✓ It was *efficient* as it had over-performed on its delivery targets, had brought together participants from multiple locations and costs were low.

APC believes the IPF program provides a very good example of how parents in disadvantaged communities can be engaged with their children's schooling. We are currently developing similar programs for parents in low socio-economic communities, parents in newly arrived families and the parents of students with disabilities.

For the effective engagement of parents with schools APC strongly recommends the development of relevant skills and practices for teachers and other support staff in parental engagement. This includes development of skills and practices for the schools workforce in demonstrating respect when working with culturally and religiously diverse families and families of children with disabilities.

The Essential Roles of Volunteer Parents and Friends

Parent and other volunteers offer a huge resource and support base for schools. The contributions of volunteers are integral to schools being able to provide their students with an appropriate schooling. Those parents and friends, who contribute endless hours in unpaid work, are an extremely important part of Australia's 'schools workforce'.

Schools rarely keep a record of their volunteers or the hours they contribute towards the work of the school. However, one principal who developed a volunteer register for his small primary school of 285 students calculated that 75 families gave a total of 140 volunteer hours a week. That added up to a staggering 5,600 hours per school year¹⁵.

The efforts of volunteers in schools may consist of parents giving time to assist in the school canteen or to coach the football team. They may consist of contributing to the school's fundraising efforts, or being part of the school's parents and friends association or the school's governance committee. Or it may be that a highly qualified professional provides his or her services free of charge to the school.

Valuing and maintaining a strong ethos of volunteering is essential to the future health and wellbeing of Australian schools. That will only be achieved if the contribution of volunteers to the work of schools is given the due appreciation it deserves.

¹⁴ Denis Muller & Associates. (2007). Successful Learning in the Early Years of Schooling: The Indigenous Parent Factor. Evaluation Report.

¹⁵ Vining, L. Working with Volunteers in Schools. Accessed on 17/08/2011 from http://www.marketingschools.net/assets/pdf_s/working_with_volunteers.pdf

Community Supports and Services as 'Schools Workforce'

Schools deal every day with an array of complex personal and social issues in their student populations. Some of these might be as simple as a young child making an inappropriate remark to another student, which can be addressed by a teacher or other staff member taking the child aside and having a talk about the expectation that students treat each other respectfully.

But others may be as serious as a student demonstrating extreme behaviours to the extent that the welfare of other students or staff members may be put at risk, or the inclusion in a mainstream class of a student with significant disabilities. In these latter cases, it is possible that the school staff may be required to call on specialist services from outside of the school, or the system of which it is a part, to address issues that it would not be reasonable, nor safe, to expect the personnel in that school to resolve.

Such specialist services may include assessments by a psychologist or speech pathologist in cases where a student has an intellectual disability or a language or social/emotional disorder. They may also include engaging with a cultural representative or migrant support worker if the student belongs to an Indigenous community or whose family is newly arrived from another country.

In such instances school personnel must be capable of making an initial assessment, be aware of the services available within their wider community to address a particular issue and have the resources to access them. It is also essential that school personnel meaningfully engage the parents of the student in making their initial assessment of the student's needs, and that this occurs at the very beginning of the process and continues throughout.

The Broader School Reform Agenda – Other Issues

Cooperative Federalism

In February 2011, the Federal Joint Parliamentary Committee on Public Accounts and Audit commenced an inquiry into the operation of funding agreements between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments.

APC has been most concerned about the operation of intergovernmental agreements and raised concerns in its submission to the inquiry about the use of national agreements in their current form as the basis for funding arrangements between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments.

APC believes that the consolidation of funding sources through the COAG National Partnerships regime has been a failure. Delivery of Australian Government funding through that mechanism has been inconsistent between states and territories. In many instances non-government schooling authorities have been required to 'compete' with government schools for funding on an inequitable basis. Often State and Territory Ministers for Education perceive themselves to be ministers for public schools. There have been instances where they have determined the proportional allocation of national partnerships funding between the government and non-government school sectors from the perspective of 'competitor' with the non-government sector.

There is a distinct lack of transparency and accountability in respect of how Commonwealth funding, meant to achieve specific purposes, is allocated or spent by the states and territories. The focus on the performance of the states and territories in meeting outcome targets as a performance measure has appeared to lead towards them adopting 'minimalist' approaches to inputs as opposed to approaches that seek to maximise benefits.

The locking up of Commonwealth funding to the states and territories for periods of up to ten years is manifestly excessive and reduces the Commonwealth's capacity to respond flexibly to changing circumstances and priorities.

The national partnerships regime significantly diminishes the Commonwealth's capacity to be a driver of reform and innovation in the development and delivery of programs aimed at addressing national policy issues.

It is essential that sufficient funding is made available to ensure that the schools workforce has the capacity to meet the needs of students, parents and the community.

Approximately \$40 billion is invested annually in schooling yet, to the best of our knowledge, an efficiency audit in respect of how federal, state and territory funds allocated to schooling are spent has never been formally conducted.

The Building the Education Revolution program highlighted the fact that large amounts of money can be wasted by government bureaucracies and the APC is of the opinion that general recurrent funding expenditure processes would not be exempt from wastage and inefficiency.

If bureaucracies use an inordinate percentage of funds in their administration this should be revealed and the funds diverted to ensure that the strength and effectiveness of the schooling workforce is maximised.

Student Performance Data

Student performance data should not be seen to sit solely in the domain of teachers and schools. Teachers and parents should work together to utilise appropriate data for improving student outcomes.

An example of good practice in this area is seen in parent teacher interviews, particularly in disadvantaged communities, which consist of parents and teachers talking together about students' performance data. Teachers ensure the parents understand the data, inform the parents of what they will be doing in school to improve the students' performance and provide the parents with information and materials required for the parents to support the students' learning at home.

School Performance Data

There is a tendency in Australia to undervalue qualitative data in the assessment of school performance.

Research conducted by APC¹⁶ found that parents consider a wide range of issues when considering whether a school is meeting their expectations. This finding was consistent with past research studies which have consistently demonstrated that a student's academic

¹⁶ Australian Parents Council. (2008) [What Parents want to know about Schools and School Performance.](#)

achievement is not the most important domain in the minds of parents when they judge a school's performance.

IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS DOMAINS WHEN PARENTS JUDGE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

| BASES FOR JUDGING | LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE | | | MEAN |
|--|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| | Low (0-4) | Moderate (5-7) | High (8-10) | |
| Base | 1003 | | | |
| | % | % | % | |
| How happy the students seem to be | 1 | 16 | 82 | 8.7 |
| Whether the school is basically heading in the right direction | 1 | 18 | 80 | 8.6 |
| The kind of people the students generally turn out to be | 2 | 18 | 79 | 8.5 |
| How well the principal and teachers seem to know the students | 2 | 19 | 78 | 8.5 |
| The academic qualifications of teaching staff | 2 | 20 | 77 | 8.5 |
| Behaviour management strategies | 1 | 20 | 76 | 8.5 |
| Participation of teaching staff in professional development | 2 | 21 | 76 | 8.4 |
| The atmosphere or "feel" of the school | 2 | 23 | 74 | 8.4 |
| Students' results in public tests or exams | 2 | 21 | 73 | 8.4 |
| What you hear about the school from other people | 4 | 30 | 66 | 8.0 |
| Students' sporting or artistic achievements | 8 | 37 | 54 | 7.4 |
| How the school expresses its faith (if a faith-based school) | 9 | 32 | 55 | 7.3 |

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Don't knows were of the order of 1 to 3%.

As the above table shows, schooling is essentially based on relationships. Qualitative data is extremely important in assessing relational domains. APC therefore contends that until ways can be found to embed qualitative data in school performance measurement, meaningful reporting to parents in respect of school performance will be incomplete.

In Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to put forward this submission. We would be happy to speak further to provide clarification or further detail about anything contained herein.

Yours faithfully



IAN DALTON
Executive Director