



Smarter Schools National Partnerships National Key Reform Project

Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status Communities



FINAL REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2011

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Acknowledgements

This project has been a truly collaborative venture. The dedication, hard work and goodwill of the Parental Engagement Taskforce members ensured the achievement of the successful outcomes from this national key reform project and overcame the challenges presented by geographical location, limited resources and different perspectives and starting points in relation to knowledge and understanding about parental engagement.

The new resources that have been developed leave a significant legacy and the contribution of the parent organisations, education authorities, schools and others who have participated in the development process is acknowledged with thanks.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home combined with parental involvement in schooling is critical to children's learning. A growing body of research shows that building effective partnerships between parents, families and schools to support children's learning leads to better learning outcomes.

This is the final report of the national collaboration project on *Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status (SES) Communities*. The project was one of six national key reform projects, funded by the Australian Government, to support jurisdictions in the implementation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships reforms.

South Australia has been the lead jurisdiction for this project.

The Parental Engagement Project

The project aimed to advance the identification, promotion and implementation of good practice in parental engagement in low socio-economic status communities as a critical factor for improving student attendance, engagement in learning and learning achievement.

The project was overseen by a Taskforce. Membership of the Taskforce included representatives from the government schooling sectors of Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland (until May 2010), Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia, the President of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales, the Executive Director of the Council of Catholic School Parents, NSW/ ACT, the Vice President, Australian Parents Council (also Executive Director, SA Federation of Catholic School Parent Communities) and the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations.

The project had three main areas of work:

- development of new resources (toolkit) for schools, school principals, teachers, parents and community groups that can be used to facilitate parental engagement in schooling;
- development and analysis of case studies on parental engagement in schools; and
- promotion about the importance of parental engagement and sharing of information about the knowledge, expertise and resources available.

The starting point for the work of this project was the earlier work by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau¹ in the development of the seminal Australian publication *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (2008).

¹ The Bureau was established by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) to promote the engagement of families with their schools with funding provided by the Australian Government.

Outcomes

A suite of resources for school communities has been developed that incorporate the work and findings arising from the project. These resources are presented as attachments to this final report. These resources are:

- The three school case studies project publications featuring findings about parental engagement in 15 schools in low socio-economic status communities:
 - *'Telling their stories' and 'Learning from their stories'. School case studies in parental engagement. Executive Summary*
 - *'Telling their stories'. School case studies in parental engagement* providing the full school case study accounts.
 - *'Learning from their stories'. Findings and themes* providing a summary of the findings and a more detailed analysis of common themes and challenges.
- A comprehensive new resource ***Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning***, which is a toolkit of practical resources for school communities. The outcomes-focussed resource is divided into four sections:
 - What is family and community engagement?
 - Why is family and community engagement important?
 - Steps to strengthen engagement
 - Strategies, case studies and resources.

The resource also features the new *School Assessment Tool (Reflection Matrix)* which school communities can use to assess where they are on a continuum of engagement and to prioritise areas for further action as part of the school planning and improvement cycle. Instructions and proformas guide users through completing the tool. Best viewed electronically, key reference documents and proformas are embedded in the resource, which also includes hyperlinks to other relevant material.

- There are two companion documents providing easy access to key resources and academic references to parental engagement:
 - ***Resources for school communities – Annotated resource list***
 - ***Parental engagement research – Key references***

Further areas of work undertaken by the Taskforce have been the promotion of the importance of parental engagement as a core component of education and the sharing of information about the knowledge, expertise and resources available about effective parental engagement to assist school communities. This has included

- Conducting a workshop of key stakeholders. Over 30 key stakeholders in parental engagement from around Australia attended a workshop (one and half days) in Adelaide in July 2010 to share information, discuss the possibility of developing further resources, and to identify other relevant work that could be undertaken to strengthen parental engagement.
- Making a submission to the consultation on the National Professional Standards for Teachers.
- Presenting a vodcast at the Australian Education Ministers 2010 Biennial Forum.
- Supporting all states/territories to actively promote parental engagement and the new resources developed by the project. Jurisdictions are using a variety of different communication strategies with schools and school communities to raise awareness about the importance of parental engagement to improving educational outcomes and providing professional development opportunities focused on strengthening parental engagement in schooling.

Implications from the Project: five key themes

There have been multiple benefits from the project. It provided an opportunity to focus in-depth on parental engagement in schooling in the Australian context, build on the work that had begun through the peak parent bodies in developing a framework and principles of school-family partnerships, and to advance the knowledge about and understanding of effective practice in engaging parents, families and communities in schooling.

The resources that have been developed through the project provide contemporary and practical information and guidance for Australian school communities in their endeavours to strengthen parental engagement. The school case studies provide relevant Australian examples about what has worked, in what contexts and what have been some of the challenges. Identifying parental engagement as one of the national key reform projects has highlighted the involvement of parents, families and communities as an important consideration in the implementation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships reforms.

The collaboration required across jurisdictions and sectors to achieve the outcomes of the project has resulted in a greater understanding and appreciation of the different approaches that jurisdictions and sectors have taken in developing and promoting parental engagement. The participation of Taskforce members from parent organisations, in particular, provided valuable perspectives that may not have been available to the Taskforce otherwise, influencing the approach and strengthening the outcomes of the project, including the practical resource development.

The whole school benefits when parental engagement is an integral part of school planning and improvement processes. While individual schools are increasingly acting on this knowledge and understanding, greater system-wide support is needed through the development and implementation of a systemic, integrated approach that embeds parent and family engagement into education policies, structures and practices across Australia. As well, there is a need to create an environment where parental engagement is seen as an integral part of the ongoing educational reform agenda.

Five key themes have emerged from the work of the project that would support the development of a comprehensive strategy for enhancing parent and family engagement in education as a critical factor for improving educational outcomes.

These themes are:

- Parent and family engagement are included as a core component of any educational reform activities.
- Existing knowledge, resources and professional development opportunities related to parental and family engagement are made easily accessible to schools and school communities.
- The range of existing resources relating to parental and family engagement is complemented by the development and promotion of additional resources.
- A national research agenda is developed to strengthen the Australian research on the benefits of and strategies for effective parental and family engagement in children's learning and schooling.
- A broad communications and social marketing strategy is developed targeting parents and families to increase awareness about the importance of parental and family engagement in education.

Recommendations

In submitting the Final Report of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Key Reform Project: *Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status (SES) Communities*, the Project Taskforce provides the following recommendations for further work:

Recommendation 1

This report on the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Key Reform Project: Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Communities be referred to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, Strategic Policy Working Group for consideration of:

- the establishment of a national working subgroup, that includes representation from the peak parent bodies in education, to develop an implementation strategy for strengthening the integration of parent and family engagement into education policies, structures and practices.

The implementation of an integrated approach would be supported by the themes identified from this project with due consideration of priorities, anticipated costs and benefits for each element of the strategy and suggested timelines.

Recommendation 2

All resources developed through this project be made freely available by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to all school communities and others interested in parental engagement.

FINAL REPORT

1 The Parental Engagement Project

This is the final report of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships National Key Reform Project: *Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status (SES) Communities*.

1.1 Introduction

Parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home combined with parental involvement in schooling is critical to children's education. A growing body of research shows that building effective partnerships between parents, families and schools to support children's learning leads to improved learning outcomes. Parents are the first and continuing educators of their children. Impacts on children from increased parental engagement include improved school behaviour, attendance, sense of wellbeing, and attitudes towards teachers, parents and the school, as well as lower early school leaving. Research also shows that teacher quality, including standards and training in parental engagement, is important for facilitating effective parental engagement.

The importance of productive partnerships between students, parents, carers, families, schools and the broader community in maximising student engagement and achievement was recognised by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, December 2008.

The national collaboration project on *Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Status (SES) Communities* was one of six national key reform projects, funded by the Australian Government, supporting jurisdictions in the implementation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships reforms.

The project aimed to advance the identification, promotion and implementation of good practice in parental engagement in low socio-economic status communities as a critical factor for improving student attendance, engagement in learning and learning achievement.

Good practice or effective practice in parental engagement in schooling focuses on two interrelated elements: parents' and families' engagement in their children's learning and parents' and families' engagement in the everyday life of the school community and school system. It is clear that at the heart of good practice in parental engagement is the development of respectful and collaborative relationships between parents and schools with the common goal of nurturing student wellbeing and achievement.

South Australia has been the lead jurisdiction for this project.

1.2 Project Taskforce

The Taskforce was established in October 2009. Chaired by the Project Director, SA Smarter Schools National Partnerships Secretariat, the role of the Taskforce has been to oversee the project, providing direction and expert advice on various aspects of the project.

All jurisdictions were invited to nominate representatives to the Taskforce. Taskforce membership included representatives from the government schooling sectors of Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland (until May 2010), Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia, the President of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales, the Executive Director of the Council of Catholic School Parents, NSW/ ACT, the Vice President, Australian Parents Council (also Executive Director, SA Federation of Catholic School Parent Communities) and the Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workforce Relations.

The Taskforce met regularly by teleconference and two in-person workshops. Taskforce members have made a significant in-kind contribution to the project by their active involvement throughout the duration of the project and by taking on specific tasks as they arose, which included: membership of the evaluation tender group; providing regular feedback in the resources development process; liaising with case study schools in their jurisdictions; and membership of the smaller reference group supporting the development of the new school assessment tool.

Taskforce members' commitment to strengthening parental engagement in schooling, capacity to working collaboratively on the development of nationally available resources and willingness to take on additional tasks has been a major contributing factor in the success of the project.

As well, Taskforce members have facilitated and coordinated their own jurisdictions' and/or stakeholder groups' contribution to the project and communicated relevant information on the progress and outcomes of the project within their respective jurisdictions/ stakeholder groups.

1.3 Project outline

The project had three main areas of work:

- development and analysis of case studies on parental engagement in schools;
- development of new resources (toolkit) for schools, school principals, teachers, parents and community groups that can be used to facilitate parental engagement in schooling; and
- promotion about the importance of parental engagement and sharing of information about the knowledge, expertise and resources available.

The starting point for the work of this project was the earlier work by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau² in the development of the seminal Australian publication *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (2008). The Framework outlines seven key dimensions of effective family-school partnerships and these dimensions have been embedded in several of the resources that have been developed as part of this project.

As the work of the project progressed, the Taskforce realised that a significant amount of information was being drawn together along with new work that would

² The Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau was established by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) to promote the engagement of families with their schools with funding provided by the Australian Government.

be of potential benefit to school communities. Keen for a practical outcome from the project, the Taskforce requested an extension to the project to convert the project's work and findings into resources appropriate for school communities.

This included the development of the new ***Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning resource***.

1.4 Project management

The project was managed through the South Australian Smarter Schools National Partnership Secretariat located in the Department of Education and Children's Services. The Secretariat, funded by the three schooling sectors – government, Catholic and independent – supports the work of the South Australian National Partnerships Council – Schooling, a Ministerial Advisory Committee established under the Education Act 1972. The Council oversees the implementation, reporting and evaluation requirements of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships in South Australia.

2 Key Project Outcomes: New Resources for School Communities

A suite of resources for school communities has been developed that incorporates the work and findings arising from the project. These resources are presented as attachments to this final report.

2.1 School case studies project

In 2010, the Taskforce invited 15 schools from rural, remote and metropolitan locations in South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria and New South Wales to participate in the case studies project.

The purpose of the case study project was to:

- identify good practice in parental engagement in schools in Low SES communities
- advance understanding of what has worked and in what contexts
- inform the development of further resources or 'toolkits' for schools
- document examples of parental engagement for other school communities to consider and draw upon.

All schools operated in communities that were identified as low socio-economic status (Low SES) as measured by the Socio-economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) as below the mean of 1,000 or the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) to 700.

To provide a representative mix of different schooling environments, the schools were identified through their engagement activities and/or where parental engagement was a focus in school plans, operation, leadership and culture and then by geographic location, school size, student population (including Indigenous and multicultural) and level of schooling.

2.1.1 'Telling their stories' School case studies in parental engagement

The school case studies document how the schools from different communities and locations have gone about strengthening school-family relationships by introducing the school, outlining the key strategies and activities in place and the progress and outcomes being experienced. The case studies also highlight the critical success factors and some of the issues facing each school community in their endeavour to ensure good educational outcomes for their children. They provide examples of what approaches, strategies and activities have worked well and improved parental engagement outcomes as a reference point for other school communities to consider and draw upon.

All 15 case study schools have been working with commitment and purpose to strengthen school-family relationships and support parental engagement in their children's learning and schooling. They provide insights into and understanding about successful parental engagement initiatives and what works well, for whom and in what contexts. In every school the combination of strategies and outcomes varied, reflecting the school's specific circumstances. As a consequence, each case study school is on its own unique journey in building and sustaining parental engagement in the life of their school community.

[‘Telling their stories’ and ‘learning from their stories’. School case studies in parental engagement.](#) Executive Summary

[‘Telling their stories’. School case studies in parental engagement](#) provides the full school case study accounts.

2.1.2 ‘Learning from their stories’ - Findings and themes

A number of common themes and challenges emerged from the case study accounts of the approaches and actions that the schools have taken and intend to take to continue to foster the involvement of parents and families.

The themes, drawn from the practical experience of the case study schools, highlight and reinforce a number of the features of effective practice and in this way provide an important contribution to the evidence base about what works in strengthening parental engagement. These common themes were:

- Developing a school culture that values parental engagement. Central to this is the school leadership team’s role in promoting the importance of successful partnerships with families and an inclusive ethos within the school.
- Creating a school environment that welcomes parents. This may include dedicating space within the school grounds as a meeting place for parents or creating a community hub.
- Sharing high expectations about learning outcomes for all students and developing an open dialogue about children’s learning.
- Building the capacity of parents to support their children’s learning. For example, by offering opportunities for parents to learn about child development and contemporary teaching practices in areas such as literacy and numeracy and by providing practical suggestions about what parents can do to assist their children’s learning.
- Parents encouraging other parents to be come involved. This may include supporting parents in taking on a leadership role in engaging other parents and families.
- Reaching out through making personal contact with families and creating opportunities for parents and school staff to regularly talk and meet informally, such as phone calls to parents or after school as parents pick up their children, as well as formally.
- Offering opportunities to parents for their own learning and development, including accredited and community based learning, and providing a dedicated learning space for parents.
- Connecting with parents in the early years so that parents can begin to network with other parents, find out about school organisation and how children learn from play experiences.
- Using school resources effectively to support parental engagement. This may include dedicating resources to an identified community liaison role or position to directly engage with and support families, especially those who may be harder to reach.
- Leveraging additional resources from outside the school, such as health related programs or access to specialist personnel, and fostering increased connection with the school through providing some of these within the school environment.

- Enlisting the support of community leaders and members and community organisations in encouraging greater parent, family and community participation in the life of the school, including in governance and decision making processes.

Ongoing collaborative partnerships had been established between a number of case study schools and community organisations with the common goal of supporting the education, health and wellbeing of local children and their families.

The case studies provide numerous examples of the action that schools can take to strengthen parental engagement in their school community. However, the case studies also outlined some of the challenges that the schools were experiencing. While the challenges identified often reflected each school's specific context and circumstances, three key challenges were identified by a number of the case study schools.

These challenges were:

- Establishing and maintaining a clear and commonly understood framework for parental engagement within the school community so that parents, families, school staff and community organisations were all working towards a well identified common goal. This often required creating a new culture within the school community that recognised, valued and worked at developing strong relationships with parents.
- Empowering parents in their partnerships with schools. Parents needed opportunities to increase their knowledge and understanding about the structure, language and organisation of schools and to build their confidence in their own abilities and capacity to engage with the school. As well, there needed to be visible commitment from the school leadership to building relationships with parents as equal partners.
- Sustaining the commitment and continuity of the resources needed to support parental engagement. Considerable effort was often needed to source and maintain funding and short term funding arrangements made it difficult to sustain programs and develop and retain the expertise needed to facilitate parental engagement strategies and activities. System-wide policies and processes are needed that allow for the ongoing commitment of resources to support and strengthen parental engagement as a key component of schooling.

Case study schools were often not aware of the range of practical resources that were available to them in the form of toolkits and guides, how they could easily access these resources or which resources might best suit their particular circumstances. Some schools indicated that they would welcome systematic or regular information provision about parental engagement to enable schools to keep up-to-date with the latest developments and resources.

School – family partnerships are not static; commitment and effort are required to develop and sustain effective partnerships. As the findings from the case studies indicate strong relationships built on respect, trust and clear communication and strong school leadership promoting an inclusive ethos within the school that values parental engagement are critical components of successful partnerships. The whole school community benefits when parental engagement is an integral part of school planning and improvement processes. By working together in equal partnership, schools, families and communities are better able to support their children in achieving the best educational outcomes from their schooling years.

['Learning from their stories'. Findings and themes](#) provides a summary of the findings from each case study and a more detailed analysis of the common themes and challenges.

2.2 Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning resource

A number of resources and toolkits on parental engagement and developing school-family relationships already exist. In considering the development of a new resource that could be used nationally the Taskforce:

- examined a number of existing resources
- reviewed the findings from the school case studies
- sought expert advice through a workshop of key stakeholders.

From this assessment, the Taskforce identified that the priority was for a new resource that:

- was outcomes focused
- built on the Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families publication
- could be incorporated into a school's improvement planning and review cycle
- provided schools with an easy to use assessment tool (reflection matrix)
- provided clear links to other existing resources, including those newly developed through this project.

The Taskforce invited the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (now Department of Education and Communities) to undertake the development of this resource, because of the Department's leading work over a number of years in the area of parental and family engagement. A reference group was established to provide advice and support to the team from the Equity Programs and Distance Education Directorate who undertook the development of the resource.

The result is a comprehensive new resource *Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning* that is a toolkit of practical resources for school communities. The resource is divided into four sections:

- What is family and community engagement?

This section provides information about the nature of effective family and community engagement by looking at contemporary educational policies and related research. The dimensions from the *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* publication are introduced along with the elements and underpinning principles of effective practice for each dimension. As well, definitions of common terms are provided.

- Why is family and community engagement important?
This section explores the benefits and outcomes of effective family and community engagement for students, families and the school, drawing on the findings from key parental engagement research references. It also examines the supporting structures that need to be in place to develop and sustain effective family and community engagement practices.
- Steps to strengthen engagement
In this section the link with the school planning and improvement cycle is made. To assist school communities to strengthen engagement a four step model is explained.

School communities are able to use the new *School Assessment Tool (Reflection Matrix)* to assess where they are on a continuum of engagement and to prioritise areas for further action. Instructions and proformas guide users through completing the tool.
- Strategies, case studies and resources
This section provides suggested strategies, reference to case study examples embedded in the resource and hyperlinks to other resources for each dimension that school communities can draw on in refining their own strategies and actions for strengthening family and community engagement.

Designed to be used as a component of a school's planning and improvement cycle, the resource is best viewed electronically so that the user can move easily to the sections and pages of most interest and relevance to their school community. Key reference documents and proformas are embedded in the resource (allowing easy access and printing) and, where internet access is available, hyperlinks take the user direct to other relevant online references, resources and websites.

The development of *Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning resource* was a major undertaking and the significant contribution of Margaret Hunter, Robyn Graham and Ryan Macpherson from the NSW Department of Education and Communities, Equity Programs and Distance Education Directorate team is acknowledged.

[**Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning resource**](#)

2.3 Resources and research findings

In scoping the need for a new resource, a number of useful resources for schools, parents and school communities on the subject of parental engagement in education were identified.

To assist school communities to more easily access these resources, an 'annotated' resource list has been developed of some of the key resources that are currently available in Australia and in the United Kingdom, USA and Canada. This list provides a brief description of what each resource offers as well as the relevant links or information to access the resource as a starting point for finding out more. A number of the sites include their own links to other resources.

A list of key references has also been compiled to provide a pathway into the contemporary research literature on parental engagement. References are to

journal articles, reviews and evaluations that have been sourced from the academic literature, university and government sites. The reference list is a starting point for those interested in reading current research findings about parental engagement or as a springboard for undertaking further research.

As the two lists have been designed as companion documents, references included in the annotated resource list are not included in the reference list and vice versa.

[Resources for school communities – Annotated resource list](#)

[Parental engagement research – Key references](#)

3 Additional Project Outcomes: Promotion and Sharing Information

Further areas of work undertaken by the Taskforce have been the promotion of the importance of parental engagement as core to education and educational reform and the sharing of information about the knowledge, expertise and resources available about effective parental engagement to assist school communities. This has included conducting a workshop, making a submission to the consultation on the National Professional Standards for Teachers and supporting jurisdictions to actively promote parental engagement and the new recourses developed by the project.

3.1 Workshop on Parental Engagement

The Parental Engagement Taskforce conducted a workshop inviting key stakeholders in parental engagement to share information, discuss the possibility of developing further resources for schools and parents to assist them to work together in partnership, and to identify other relevant work that could be undertaken to strengthen parental engagement. Over 30 participants from around Australia attended the one and half day workshop in Adelaide in July 2010.

Workshop participants considered and discussed some of the key resources that were available or under development. As well, the preliminary findings from the school case studies provided additional information about the potential areas for further development and promotion of resources to assist schools in engaging parents and families.

Workshop outcomes

Workshop participants discussed how a 'model' parental engagement toolkit might be developed with the following recommendations made:

- synthesise, build on, and make existing work accessible
- link to current research
- include definitions of key terms such as 'parental engagement'
- define audience groups
- discuss the need for cultural change leading to more meaningful parental engagement initiatives
- consider the role of students in parental engagement
- have an implementation plan
- decide on a medium for delivery
- evaluate the product and approach.

Other priority actions recommended to the Taskforce to consider were the need to:

- develop and maintain a knowledge bank or repository that maps and links to existing research, resources and materials on parental engagement
- develop a research agenda to encourage further Australian studies on the benefits of and strategies for effective parental engagement in children's learning

- develop strategies for creating an environment where parental engagement is central to the education agenda in Australia.

[**Assisting collaborative partnerships in parental engagement Workshop report, July 2010**](#)

3.2 Submission to the National Standards for Teachers

A submission was made by the Taskforce to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) National Professional Standards for Teachers consultation.

The submission outlined suggestions for strengthening the focus on parental and community partnerships in the standards by incorporating elements of parental engagement and the development of school, family and community partnerships as part of the requirement for teachers across the three domains of professional knowledge, practice and engagement.

3.3 Promotion of parental engagement

The Taskforce took the opportunity presented by the 2010 Biennial Forum to develop a vodcast featuring the importance of parental engagement and outlining the project. Taskforce member Ms Ann Bliss highlighted the beneficial impact that effective partnerships between students, families and teachers are core to education and the beneficial impact these have on supporting student learning.

In developing the new resources, the Taskforce was also mindful of the need for communication and promotional activities to raise awareness within school communities of the importance of parental engagement to improving educational outcomes and of the availability of the new resources.

As the project timeframe and funding did not allow for a major social marketing campaign, the Taskforce has sought to utilise the existing mechanisms that are already in place to communicate with schools within jurisdictions and within sectors about the Smarter Schools National Partnerships. In this way, an approach to promotion tailored to the specific circumstances and contexts of different jurisdictions could be developed.

All states/territories were provided with a small amount of financial assistance from the project to undertake some communication and promotional activities relating to parental engagement. In doing this jurisdictions were asked to give priority to:

- communicating with schools and school communities participating in the Smarter Schools Low Socio-Economic School Communities National Partnership in the first instance
- creating opportunities for involving all three schooling sectors (government, Catholic and Independent) in some/all of the promotional activities
- including promotion of the resources that have been developed through the Parental Engagement Project.

Jurisdictions are using a variety of different communication strategies with schools and school communities and providing professional development opportunities to focus on strengthening parental engagement in schooling. These include:

- developing newsletters, e-bulletins and including information on websites and planning to link to the project resources
- providing workshops to schools, with opportunities to explore the resources, tools and case studies developed through the project and strengthen understanding of how these resources can be utilised to facilitate stronger family-school partnerships
- holding cross sector and regional forums to showcase and share some of the good practice strategies and activities that have been developed and implemented
- developing web-based professional learning (webinars) on parental engagement
- working collaboratively with parent organisations and researchers on furthering knowledge about parental engagement
- developing articles and 'good news stories' for general release on case study school activities focussing on parental engagement that can be used across sectors
- communicating through stakeholder journals and newsletters
- including parental engagement information in staff newsletters/intranet portals/e-news and the development of posters and fact sheets for staff
- presenting at conferences, workshops and seminars including presentations by representatives from project case study schools.

It is anticipated that some communication and promotion about the new resources will continue beyond the life of this project.

4 Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Benefits of the Project

There have been multiple benefits from the project. Identifying parental engagement as a specific topic of one of the national key reform projects has increased consideration by jurisdictions of parental engagement as an important component of the implementation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships reforms.

The project provided an opportunity to focus in-depth on parental engagement in schooling in the Australian context. It enabled the work that had begun through the peak parent bodies (Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council) and funded through the Australian Government, to be utilised and built upon to further advance the knowledge about and understanding of effective practice in engaging parents, families and communities in schooling.

The resources that have been developed through the project provide contemporary and practical information and guidance for Australian school communities in their endeavours to strengthen parental engagement. As well, through the school case studies, school communities are able to learn from the practical experience of other school communities about what has worked, in what contexts and what have been some of the challenges that have presented.

The collaboration required across jurisdictions and sectors to achieve the outcomes of the project has resulted in a greater understanding and appreciation of the different approaches that jurisdictions and sectors have taken in developing and promoting parental engagement. The participation of Taskforce members from parent organisations, in particular, provided valuable perspectives that may not have been available to the Taskforce otherwise, influencing the approach and strengthening the outcomes of the project, including the practical resource development.

4.2 Implications from the Project: five key themes

The findings from this project indicate that the whole school community benefits when parental engagement is an integral part of school planning and improvement processes. Effective and sustained school – family partnerships are developed through strong relationships built on respect, trust and clear communication. School leadership visibly promoting an inclusive ethos within the school that values parental engagement is a critical component, along with the genuine commitment and effort of all partners. By working in equal partnership, schools, families and communities are better able to support their children in achieving the best educational outcomes from their schooling years.

While individual schools are increasingly acting on this knowledge and understanding about parental engagement, the project found that the support and resources offered to schools varied across locations and tended to be developed and provided on a jurisdiction or sector specific basis. Greater system-wide support is needed through the development and implementation of a systemic, integrated approach that embeds parent and family engagement into education policies, structures and practices across Australia. As well, there is a need to create an environment where parental engagement is seen as an integral part of the ongoing educational reform agenda.

Five key themes have emerged from the work of the project as follows, that would support the development of a comprehensive strategy for enhancing parent and family engagement in Australian education as a critical factor for improving educational outcomes.

Theme 1: Parent and family engagement are included as a core component of any educational reform activities.

The project has extensively reviewed parental and family engagement in Australia. While considerable advances are being made in ensuring that parents' voices are heard in relation to their children's education, parent and family engagement is not always included as part of the terms of reference for significant educational planning and reviews.

For parental and family engagement in Australia to be strengthened and sustained, it is crucial that parent and family engagement is identified as a core component of educational reform at all levels of government and sector policy development.

The inclusion of a specific reference to engaging with parent and carers in the recently released National Professional Standards for Teachers, provides an example of how parental and family engagement can be embedded in a key educational reform activity. Other examples of current reform activities that could include a specific focus on parent and family engagement are in:

- the design and delivery of pre-service teacher training and early career teacher programs
- the development of standards and/or the provision of professional development for educators and school leadership (including parents)
- sector and school review and continuous improvement processes, including teaching and learning policies and practices and staffing models.

Theme 2: Existing knowledge, resources and professional development opportunities related to parental and family engagement are made easily accessible to schools and school communities.

Schools and school communities studied in this project were not always aware of the parental engagement resources and supports for professional learning and development already available within schooling sectors, jurisdictions and/or nationally.

Establishing a national knowledge bank or repository to link to the range of Australian and other research, resources and materials on parental and family engagement would make this information more easily accessible to schools, parents and families.

The knowledge bank or repository could include:

- discussion forums and papers exploring the understanding of current concepts, terminology and the different dimensions relating to parental and family engagement and school parent partnerships examples of program design, skills and approaches that foster parental participation in the classroom and engagement in the school and with their child's learning
- regularly updated links to professional learning supports that are currently available.

Theme 3: The range of existing resources relating to parental and family engagement is complemented by the development and promotion of additional resources.

Although a wide range of resources already exist and additional resources relating to parental and family engagement were developed through this project, the project also identified several gaps where further development of resources is needed. For example:

- resources that are specially tailored to take into account cultural and linguistic diversity
- resources that are specifically designed for use by parents
- resources for students, recognising their role in developing school-family partnerships.

The project identified that in the development of any new resources, the following should be taken into account:

- the audience needs to be clearly defined
- build from existing resources that demonstrate good practice
- acknowledge that different parents want different types of relationships or partnerships with school and that it is a two-way partnership
- the delivery mechanisms of resource material need to be identified and made as simple and accessible as possible
- resources need to be underpinned by relevant and current research findings.

Theme 4: A national research agenda is developed to strengthen the Australian research on the benefits of and strategies for effective parental and family engagement in children's learning and schooling.

It has only been in comparatively recent years that the benefit of parental and family engagement to improving education outcomes has become a topic receiving research attention in Australia. More often, the important role of parents has only been discovered as a component or finding of research focussed on other aspects of education.

An ongoing and clearly identified research agenda for enquiry into effective parental and family engagement in children's learning and schooling is needed. It would provide the foundation for building a solid Australian specific evidence base to support continued investment of time and resources by schools in developing and implementing parental engagement strategies and activities.

Promoting the research agenda across disciplines and sectors interested in the education and wellbeing of children and families would encourage and support innovation. This would capitalise on the expertise from a range of fields to potentially develop new insights and strategies. The research findings could be disseminated through mechanisms such as the knowledge bank and/ or a regular (perhaps biennial) conference on parental engagement.

As a relatively new but rapidly developing area, exploring the use of emerging technologies to enhance parental engagement in education would be an important component of the research agenda.

Theme 5: A broad communications and social marketing strategy is developed targeting parents and families to increase awareness about the importance of parental and family engagement in education.

The work of the project highlighted the need for greater community understanding about the role of parents and families as the first and continuing educators of their children and in the ways that all parents and families can be involved in the ongoing education of their child. While individual schools and their communities have gone some way to promoting the role of parents and families, a much broader communications and social marketing strategy is needed. This strategy would seek to increase awareness about the importance of parental and family engagement in education.

The broad communications and social marketing strategy could include:

- creating ‘ambassadors’ to advocate for strengthening parental engagement in education
- highlighting the ways parents and families are already involved
- emphasising the long term benefits to children/ young people of successfully completing schooling and parent and families’ roles in this
- taking into account parents’ and families’ differing circumstances and responsibilities
- how to access parental engagement resources and parent organisations.

4.3 Recommendations

In submitting the Final Report of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Key Reform Project: *Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Communities*, the Project Taskforce provides the following recommendations for further work:

Recommendation 1

This report on the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Key Reform Project: *Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-economic Communities* be referred to Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, Strategic Policy Working Group for consideration of:

- the establishment of a national working subgroup, that includes representation from the peak parent bodies in education, to develop an implementation strategy for strengthening the integration of parent and family engagement into education policies, structures and practices.

The implementation of an integrated approach would be supported by the themes identified from this project with due consideration of priorities, anticipated costs and benefits for each element of the strategy and suggested timelines.

Recommendation 2

All resources developed through this project be made freely available by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to all school communities and others interested in parental engagement.