



Low SES School Communities
Smarter Schools National Partnership
evaluation

Case studies of school external
partnerships: parent partnerships

Second Progress Report

December, 2012

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This focus study work has formed part of a more extensive evaluation of school external partnerships being undertaken by a consortium comprising researchers from the University of Canberra and the University of Melbourne.

Glossary

AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
AEO	Aboriginal Education Officer
CEO	Community Engagement Officer
DEC	Department of Education and Communities
EARS	Executive Assessment and Review Schedule
HAT	Highly Accomplished Teacher
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
KLA	Key Learning Area
LBOTE	Language Background Other Than English
LCC	Learning and Community Centre
MOODLE	Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment
MULTiLit	Making Up Lost Time in Literacy
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy
NMS	National Minimum Standard
P&C	Parents and Citizens (P&C) Association
P&F	Parents and Friends
PaCE	Parental and Community Engagement program
PASP	Priority Action Schools Program
PCC	Parent and Community Committee
PEC	Parent Engagement Coordinator
PLP	Personalised Learning Plan
PSP	Priority Schools Program
PSFP	Priority Schools Funding Program
SAM	School Administrative Manager
SAO	School Administrative Officer
SMART	School Measurement Assessment and Reporting Toolkit
SRC	Student Representative Council
STLA	Support Teacher Learning Assistance
TARS	Teacher Assessment and Review Schedule
YCDI	You Can Do It

1. Introduction

The University of Canberra's Education Institute (UCEI) in conjunction with the Centre for Research on Education Systems (CRES) of the University of Melbourne has been commissioned on behalf of the New South Wales (NSW) Minister for Education to undertake an evaluation of school external partnerships initiatives in the NSW Smarter Schools National Partnership on Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) School Communities, henceforth referred to as the Low SES SSNP.

The evaluation is one of two that address initiatives under the National Partnership (NP) Agreement on Low SES School Communities:

- *The Evaluation of School External Partnerships* being conducted by the UCEI in conjunction with the CRES: and
- *The Evaluation of School Staffing, Management and Accountability Initiatives* being conducted by CRES.

CRES is working with UCEI to conduct case studies and to extract information relevant to the two evaluations. This research partnership enables the maximization of information gained whilst minimizing the burden on schools.

These evaluations have their origins in the 2008 changes to Commonwealth-State funding arrangements and the Council of Australian Government's (COAG's) subsequent approval of the National Education Agreement and creation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships. Evaluations address aspects of the bilateral National Partnership Agreement for Low SES Communities between the Commonwealth and NSW and the associated implementation plan.

Case studies of Low SES SSNP initiatives

This report is part of the agreed work program for the evaluation of school external partnerships initiatives. It is the second progress report of the evaluation and in line with the project's evaluation plan it focuses on school partnerships with parents. It presents six case studies of government, Catholic and independent schools that have implemented a range of parent partnership initiatives as part of the Low SES SSNP. The case studies provide a snapshot of how the initiatives have been working in different school settings. They consider the impact of the partnership initiatives based on changes in student performance as well as non-academic outcomes related to the way teachers and schools work with their communities.

Method

The evaluation of school external partnerships raises specific methodological challenges. Partnerships between schools and their communities can be difficult to quantify and the personal and institutional identities they are built on are subject to change. Enabling factors and outcomes can be difficult for participants to identify and challenging for evaluators to observe and measure. This evaluation's case studies have been built through 'progressive focusing', which involves building a layered site-specific picture through a number of contacts and interviews to document perspectives and judgments, and negotiate meaning and

interpretation. Such an approach is also consistent with the process-focused nature of relationship and partnership building itself.

The case study method employed in this study of NSW schools entailed a set of steps including selection of schools, initial contact with schools to obtain consent to participate, telephone interviews with principals, school visits, follow up contacts, and data analysis and report writing.

Selection of schools

Case study schools were selected in consultation with authorities from the relevant sectors. Important in the selection process was ensuring that case study schools as a whole represented some of the diversity of Low SES SSNP schools in NSW—in relation to school type, location, sector, size, and student characteristics.

The NP school database, school websites and individual school plans were analysed in order to select six case study schools that were implementing external partnership initiatives related to the Low SES SSNP.

Before any contact was made with schools the researchers lodged an application for human research ethics clearance with the University of Canberra's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). HREC approval, authorising the conduct of interviews and focus group activity with school communities at nominated sites, was obtained in March 2012.

Initial contact with schools

The research team worked in partnership with sector authority representatives to contact and seek the participation of the selected schools. After being advised of the evaluation by sector authorities, selected schools were contacted by the evaluation team at the end of Term 1, 2012, with an invitation to participate.

A follow up telephone conversation provided an opportunity to discuss the evaluation project with principals, especially the implications of participation. One school declined the invitation to participate because of timing, and consequently an alternative school was selected. This telephone meeting together with email contact allowed researchers and schools to develop an agreed schedule and protocols for school visits.

Telephone meetings with principals

Telephone meetings were then held with each principal to ensure local understanding about the evaluation project, to engage schools in the development of a detailed school profile and to plan for the school visit. The following key documents were prepared to facilitate the telephone meeting with principals. These documents were emailed in advance of the telephone meetings:

- individualised information sheet for each school
- school profile developed using system level data, 'My School,' the school website and the school's 2011 Annual Report where available

- semi-structured interview schedule framework, detailing questions related to: school leadership; parent and community member involvement at the school; parent/guardian involvement in children's education at home; parent and community member involvement in school decision making; other external partnerships, impacts and indicators
- the detailed interview frameworks customised with questions relevant for each group
- template to facilitate the development of the plan for the school visit.

Schools were informed that the evaluation project aimed to:

- describe the specific initiatives / strategies implemented by schools as part of their Low SES SSNP participation
- identify factors that were critical to implementation
- determine the extent to which initiatives had led to change or improvement
- identify resources used to implement initiatives
- assess the implications for sustainability and transferability.

A draft school profile statement was prepared for each school in advance of the visits. This profile included student characteristics, staffing information, student performance, financial information, sources of funding and NP financial information.

School visits

School visits were undertaken by the project team from the end of May to the end of June 2012. In some cases schools were visited more than once if follow up interviews were regarded as necessary. Individual and group interviews were held with principals, school leaders, Parents and Citizens (P&C) Association members where appropriate, parents and other community members more generally, teachers, and relevant professional and paraprofessional staff. School visits involved at least one day per school and included extensive interviews and focus group sessions, a tour of the school, and opportunities to observe and participate in relevant activities to gain insights into the relevant school operations.

The critical task for the researchers was to gain insights into the Low SES SSNP program on the ground. In particular the project sought information on:

- what funding had been allocated and how it was used
- how schools conceptualised their overall participation in the Low SES National Partnership, with a specific focus however on external partnerships initiatives
- how those partnership initiatives connected with other elements of school reform
- aims of the critical activities, how they linked to the school plans and targets, and

perceived challenges and impacts.

Schools also provided relevant documentation, such as newsletters, media releases and school reports, to assist the research and evaluation process.

Follow up

Subsequent to school visits the researchers followed up with individual schools in order to complete interviews or to seek clarification and confirm data collected on visits.

Profile of the case study schools

The schools selected as case studies are located across five regions and comprise four government schools, one Catholic primary school and one independent K-12 school. They include primary, secondary and combined schools and schools with diverse student populations in terms of numbers of Indigenous students and those with language backgrounds other than English. All of the selected schools started to implement Low SES SSNP initiatives in 2009/10.

The following tables detail school information and characteristics of case study schools participating in the evaluation of parent partnerships initiatives. Table 1.1 lists the schools and provides information relating to school type, sector, region, and enrolments. The names of the schools have been changed to ensure anonymity and enrolments have been rounded to the nearest 50 to minimise potential for identification.

Table 1.1 List of case study schools and characteristics

School Name	Sector	Region/Diocese	Type	Enrolments
Independent College	Independent	S W Sydney	K-12	>900
Western High School	Government	W Sydney	7-10	600-650
North Coast Public School	Government	N Coast	K-6	400-450
Valley Public School	Government	Hunter CC	K-6	<250
South Coast High School	Government	Illawarra SE	7-12	700-750
Catholic Primary School	Catholic	Sydney Archdiocese	K-6	650-700

Funding received by each case study school to implement Low SES SSNP initiatives overall is identified in Table 1.2, together with the level of funding each school allocated to parent focussed programs under External Partnerships Reform Area 6. A further exploration of these allocations is undertaken in Chapter 11 where we identify the nature of schools' expenditure on parent focussed programs. In general, schools in the evaluation do not deploy large proportions of their NP funding into overtly partnership-focussed activity, reflecting perhaps

the power of competing commitments such as literacy and numeracy programs and teacher development. School plans and school-based interviews reinforced this theme. It should be noted, however, that specific allocations identified under NP strategies may not necessarily fully reflect the school's commitment to building its partnerships with its parent communities – some activity, for example, may be covered under other areas within the initiative and this theme is explored at further length in the case studies that follow. Nevertheless, table 1.2 generates a useful snapshot of activity, focus and committed NP resources at the school level.

Table 1.2 Low SSNP funding to case study schools and allocations to reform area 6

School Name	Low SES	Direct allocation to parent partnerships (Low SES SSNP)
Independent College	\$750,000	\$20,210
Western High School	\$682,036	\$60,000
North Coast Public School	\$423,803	\$113,000
Valley Public School	\$259,574	\$16,000
South Coast High School	\$735,137	\$80,000
Catholic Primary School	\$653,000	\$38,000

Teacher characteristics: case study government schools

In developing a picture of case study school environments it is important to understand school staffing profiles. Tables 1.3 and 1.4 show selected teacher characteristics of government case study primary and secondary schools respectively. Each table also indicates the average characteristics of **all** teachers in government Low SES SSNP primary and secondary schools respectively. Unfortunately, comparable data are not available for the Catholic and Independent case study schools.

The teacher characteristics provided in Tables 1.3 and 1.4 are the sex, age and experience (years as a teacher and years in current position) profiles of the teaching workforce in 2010, the percentage of teachers who left the school for any reason during 2010, and the average number of days of sick leave for teachers for the first part of 2011. Levels of sick leave and turnover of staff are potential teacher satisfaction measures and, in the case of turnover, impact on the efficacy of professional development and attempts to develop on-going relationships with students and parents. Experience measures at least partly reflect the impact of mobility over time—a school with a highly mobile labour force, all else equal, might be expected to have a teacher workforce with a lower level of experience.

Table 1.3 Selected teacher characteristics of government case study schools and all government primary schools participating in the Low SES SSNP, NSW

	<i>All government primary schools in the Low SES SSNP</i>	<i>Valley Public School</i>	<i>North Coast Public School</i>
Sex of teachers (%)			
Males	19.0	21.4	38.1
Females	81.0	78.6	61.9
Age of teachers (%)			
Under 30 years old	9.2	7.1	0.0
30 to 49 years old	48.0	64.3	28.6
50 years or older	42.9	28.6	71.4
Years of service of teachers (%)			
Less than one year	4.6	7.1	4.8
1 to 3 years	14.4	21.4	9.5
4 to 9 years	20.0	21.4	14.3
10 or more years	61.0	50.0	71.4
Years in current position %			
Less than one year	13.6	28.6	4.8
1 to 3 years	31.6	28.6	28.6
4 to 9 years	32.6	35.7	33.3
10 or more years	22.3	7.1	33.3
Teachers leaving for any reason (%)			
Turnover	12.9	7.1	0.0
Average days sick leave per teacher			
Absence	6.5	9.1	5.8

Source: Based on data supplied by NSW DEC. Sick leave is for only part of 2011, all other values for 2010. Values for schools with few teachers can change substantially from year to year. Values for *All government* schools are averages across schools.

Table 1.4 Selected teacher characteristics of government case study schools and all government secondary schools participating in the Low SES SSNP, NSW

	<i>All government secondary schools in the Low SES SSNP</i>	<i>Western High School</i>	<i>South Coast High School</i>
Sex of teachers (%)			
Males	42.1	35.2	65.0
Females	57.9	64.8	35.0
Age of teachers (%)			
Under 30 years old	12.3	13.0	1.7
30 to 49 years old	49.1	57.4	23.3
50 years or older	38.6	29.6	75.0
Years of service of teachers (%)			
Less than one year	5.9	13.0	5.0
1 to 3 years	15.4	24.1	5.0
4 to 9 years	23.8	33.3	13.3
10 or more years	54.9	29.6	76.7
Years in current position %			
Less than one year	12.0	9.1	8.3
1 to 3 years	31.0	36.4	26.7
4 to 9 years	30.4	40.9	35.0
10 or more years	26.6	16.6	30.0
Teachers leaving for any reason (%)			
Turnover	10.7	18.5	6.7
Average days sick leave per teacher			
Absence	6.4	5.1	11.8

Source: Based on data supplied by NSW DEC. Sick leave is for only part of 2011, all other values for 2010. Values for schools with few teachers can change substantially from year to year. Values for *All government* schools are averages across schools.

The results in Table 1.3 and 1.4 are not always consistent, but suggest that of the government case study schools, the teachers at North Coast Public School and South Coast High School are the most experienced and stable (above the average for government schools participating in the Low SES SSNP). The teachers at Western High School are less experienced (less than the average for all Low SES SSNP government secondary schools).

School profile

Each school case study provides background information related to the following six measures:

- **Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)** scale was developed specifically to enable meaningful comparisons of schools that are similar (like-schools) in terms of measured socio-economic advantage and disadvantage based on student intake. More details can be found at: http://www.acara.edu.au/myschool/myschool_glossary.html
- **Language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE)** measure is the number of LBOTE students as a percentage of all enrolments.
- **Indigenous:** This measure is the number of students who identify as Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander as a percentage of all enrolments.
- **National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)¹:** Mean achievement scores for 2010 are provided. The results are based on reading, one of four literacy components in the program, and on numeracy.
- **Attendance:** This measure is calculated at a school level as the average number of school days attended by all students as a percentage of the total number of possible school days.
- **Completion:** This measure is determined by the number of achieved senior school certificates as a percentage of the school enrolment.

All figures related to these measures are based on 2010 data. The use of 2010 provides a profile of schools at the beginning of their participation in the Low SES SSNP.

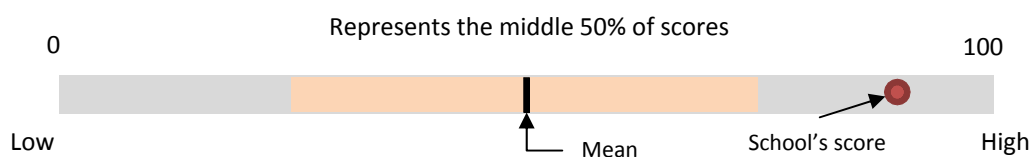
Information relating to the measures is presented in a range of scales (see below) that are inclusive of all government, Catholic and independent schools in NSW. Each scale commences with the possible minimum value at one end and the possible maximum at the other end². The salmon banding represents the middle 50 per cent of schools³. Mean state values are identified in the middle of each scale, represented by a black vertical line. The red

¹ NAPLAN: an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 made up of tests in the four areas (or 'domains') of: Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation), and Numeracy. NAPLAN tests skills in literacy and numeracy that are developed over time, through the school curriculum

² Please note that the minimum and maximum numbers for scales differ as they reflect the possible range in school samples.

³ Please note that the possible minimum and possible maximum numbers for scales differ as they reflect the possible range in school samples.

dot indicates the school's score on the scale.



Structure of the report

The school case studies are provided in separate chapters, ordered by broad type—primary and secondary. We commence with North Coast Public School in Chapter 3. The case studies provide insights into contextual circumstances, school goals and intentions, implementation processes and challenges and impacts. They provide an opportunity to examine factors critical to effective implementation of initiatives.

Following the case studies is a brief analysis which synthesises some key themes and issues that emerge.

Before turning to the case studies, we review background information on the Low SES SSNP initiatives and approaches taken to evaluate the initiatives. These are provided in the next chapter.

2. Evaluation of the Low SES SSNP External Partnerships Initiatives

Background to the National Partnerships

The National Partnerships are agreed educational policy objectives in areas of nationally significant reform or service delivery improvement. They have been designed with clearly defined outputs and benchmarks that support the goals set by the National Education Agreement and the vision of the Melbourne Declaration of Goals for Young Australians. All policy documents represent a joint commitment to lifting education outcomes for Australian students made between the Australian Government and the Governments of the States and Territories, developed through COAG.

A total of six National Partnerships were signed between the Commonwealth and all State and Territory governments in 2009.

The three **Smarter Schools** National Partnerships (SSNPs) are:

1. Literacy and Numeracy
2. Improving Teacher Quality
3. Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities

All partnerships are designed to complement one another, particularly the three Smarter Schools National Partnerships relevant to school-age students. They share common objectives and theoretical framing and are built upon a solid evidence base.

Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National Partnership

The Low SES SSNP targets students from Low socio-economic school communities, to improve their education and life opportunities (SSNP 2011).

Schools that are participating in the Low SES SSNP may choose to implement strategies from six areas of reform, though reform areas 1 and 4 are mandatory for all schools. Government schools are required to implement all six reform areas.

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Reform Area 1: | Incentives to attract high-performing teachers and principals |
| Reform Area 2: | Adoption of best practice performance management and staffing arrangements that articulate a clear role for principals |
| Reform Area 3: | School operational arrangements that encourage innovation and flexibility |
| Reform Area 4: | Provide innovative and tailored learning opportunities |
| Reform Area 5: | Strengthen school accountability |

Reform Area 6: External partnerships with parents, other schools, businesses and communities and the provision of access to extended services (including through brokering arrangements)

Reform Area 6, the focus of this study, aims to strengthen participating schools' abilities to address identified needs through ongoing engagement with the broader community. It encourages schools to work with communities and to expand schools' services. Suggested strategies for working with communities include: hosting community activities or acting as a link for community services; engaging parents, community members and community organisations to participate in the development and implementation of the school plan and other initiatives; engaging parents and others in teaching and learning within the school and outside the school so that they can better support their children and the school; provide support to community members (for e.g. Aboriginal Elders) to better participate in school activities. Strategies to expand schools' services include: Suggested strategies for expanding school's services include: offering extended transition to school programs by partnering with local preschools and community services; employing specialist support services, including allied health services, counselling services, home school liaison officers and partnership officers; providing before and after school care, homework centres and other services at school.

New South Wales policy context

The selection of schools to participate in the Low SES SSNP by their sector (government, Catholic and independent) and their type (primary, secondary, combined, special) was based on the following factors:

- school's score on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD). The index was created using 2006 Census data for the social and economic characteristics of mostly small geographic areas across Australia. Values for the index were linked to parent address information to provide a nationally consistent measure for each school.
- state-level criteria (government schools only)
- new or continuing schools supported through the Priority Action Schools Program (PASP) and not already included in the IRSD-based list
- thirty next most disadvantaged schools identified by the Priority Schools Programs (PSP)⁴ survey as meeting the criteria for the PASP.
- schools not already selected and in which more than 25 per cent of total enrolments were Aboriginal students (averaged over a 3 year period)
- schools located in remote areas of NSW as identified by the ABS's Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA).⁵

⁴ PSP: a NSW government program which supports schools serving high concentrations of low socio-economic status (SES) communities in New South Wales. Additional funding, staffing and consultancy support are provided through PSP to Priority Schools only. These resources are provided in addition to the resources provided to all government schools.

⁵ ARIA: an index of the accessibility of places to service centres, or conversely of remoteness of places.

Table 2.1 shows the characteristics of the schools participating in the Low SES SSNP. The table also shows the year in which schools joined the program. Since schools are expected to participate in the program for four years, the final year of the program should be 2015.

, 635 NSW schools are participating in the Low SES SSNP, of which 86.5 per cent are from the government sector, 9.7 per cent from the Catholic sector and 3.8 per cent from the independent sector. The majority of the schools participating in the Low SES SSNP are primary (436 or 68.4 per cent), with smaller numbers of secondary (111 or 17.4 per cent), combined (60 or 9.4 per cent) and special (30 or 4.7 per cent) schools. Not all the combined schools include Year 11 or 12 students.

Table 2.1 Schools participating in the Low SES SSNP by sector, type of school and the year of joining the initiative, NSW

	2009/10		2011		2012		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	N
Total	52.0	331	30.0	191	18.0	113	100.0	635
Sector								
<i>Government</i>	89.1	295	85.9	164	80.5	91	86.5	550
<i>Catholic</i>	6.9	23	11.5	22	14.1	16	9.7	61
<i>Independent</i>	3.9	13	2.6	5	5.3	6	3.8	24
Type of school								
<i>Primary</i>	66.5	220	78.5	150	57.4	64	68.4	434
<i>Secondary</i>	18.1	60	14.7	28	20.0	23	17.4	111
<i>Combined</i>	12.1	40	2.1	4	13.9	16	9.4	60
<i>Special</i>	3.3	11	4.7	9	8.7	10	4.7	30

Sources: www.nationalpartnerships.nsw.edu.au/resources/documents/SchoolList-LSES.pdf, My School website and selected school web sites.

Note: Schools commencing in 2009 and 2010 are combined for reporting purposes.

Evaluation of the External Partnerships initiative

The challenge in this evaluation is to identify the unique effects of the External Partnerships Initiatives, specifically those involving parents, schools and students. The following factors are being considered as part of the evaluation exercise:

- Confounding effect of schools' participation in other National Partnerships designed to improve educational outcomes. For instance, schools may also be participating in the Literacy and Numeracy and/or Improving Teacher Quality National Partnerships.

Geographical areas are given a score (continuous between 0 to 15) based on the road distance to service towns of different sizes. Scores for regions are derived by averaging scores of 1 km² grid.

- Number and combinations of reforms that schools may choose to implement and the varying levels of resources they may allocate to these reforms.
- Local or existing circumstances that may impact on a school's ability to benefit from specific strategies and the 'distance' individual schools must travel to demonstrate positive outcomes.
- Reallocation of existing resources from other programs to the External Partnerships Initiatives and the loss of potential benefits from these other programs.
- Limited time span in which the initiatives can have an effect and in which to monitor any changes in outcomes.

The effects of interest to this evaluation are of three types:

- **Immediate** effects of the particular incentive e.g. attracting more parents and families into closer relationships with the school
- **Intermediate or indicator** effects e.g. enhanced participation in school activities with a more active and engaged school community
- Effect on **students' overall learning and engagement** e.g. as might be reflected in improved student performance NAPLAN scores, school-based assessments or in Year 12 completion. This may be associated with parents playing a stronger role in the teaching and learning agendas of the school.

Evaluation design

The focus school case studies developed in this report represent just one element – albeit an important one – of an overall evaluation strategy that draws on five key inquiry components: database development and analysis; literature review, school plan/ reports content analysis; stakeholder surveys; and focus school case studies.

1. Database development and analysis

To understand fully the unique context and operating environment of each school, a database is being built. The database contains a rich and detailed profile of each school's characteristics, circumstances and its programs and initiatives relevant to the NPs. To minimise the burden on schools, in the first instance data has been obtained from the central administrative sources, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)⁶, and information that has already been collected by system authorities relating to initiative implementation, funding and school and student characteristics including ICSEA

⁶ ACARA: the independent authority responsible for the development of a national curriculum, a national assessment program and a national data collection and reporting program that supports 21st century learning for all Australian students.

Status⁷. This will be the basis for a consolidated database of NSW schools over the duration of the project to inform the evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of Low SES SSNP initiatives. Some possible outcome measures to include in the database are: NAPLAN performance in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9; school-based assessment and reporting mechanisms; Year 12 or equivalent attainment (where relevant); student destinations and transitions (where relevant); student turnover, attendance and retention; school satisfaction (parents, students), student and school community engagement (through surveys of parents and students), schools' evaluation of the effectiveness of initiatives and staff turnover and levels of absenteeism.

The database will be analysed using appropriate multivariate statistical techniques.

2. Literature review

A second source of data is the review of educational research and policy literature in the area of school community partnerships for the purpose of informing the methodological approach to the case studies. The focus of the literature has been on research and policy on partnerships within Low SES school communities. Such partnerships are supported through policies and programs at the state and federal level, underpinned by national and international research.

3. School plans/reports content analysis

A third source of data will be a content analysis of the school plans and information provided for annual reports. These plans indicate the school context, the NP reforms with which the school is engaged, the priority areas, strategies and source of resources, intended outcomes and targets and responsible parties.

4. Stakeholder surveys

A fourth source of data is information provided through school-based online surveys. In order to understand the impact and challenges of programs and initiatives at the school level, surveys of school principals and teachers as well as more targeted student, parent and community partner surveys will be undertaken.

The aim of these surveys is to collect more detailed information on the practices and processes that will help to assess the impact of external partnerships *initiatives* at the school level. These surveys will be undertaken in collaboration with the school staffing, management and accountability initiatives evaluation project to minimise the demands made on schools. Surveys of principals and teachers aim to assess the value of the NP in general,

⁷ The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale that enables meaningful comparisons to be made across schools. It has been developed specifically for the *My School* website for the purpose of identifying schools serving similar student populations. The variables used in calculating a value on the ICSEA scale include student-level data on the occupation and education level of parents/carers, and/or socio-economic characteristics of the areas where students live, whether a school is in a metropolitan, regional or remote area, proportion of students from a language background other than English, as well as the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at the school. In using the ACARA data associated with The My School database (including ICSEA) calculations and school financial information) our interpretation is of course subject to the caveats associated with that data as set out on the My School website.

and the value of particular initiatives specifically supported by NP funding within school settings. They are seeking information about synergies with other programs, cooperation with other schools or community groups, difficulties in the implementation of the initiatives and any effects associated with redirection of resources and estimates of the extent of funding for particular initiatives.

The issues to be explored through the surveys have been identified in consultation with stakeholders and the surveys will be trialled prior to roll-out. The design of the surveys has also taken into account the data being collected through other means, such as the situational analysis scans and other reports and the *Cross-sectoral Impact Survey (CSIS)*.

5. School case studies

The case studies, the focus of this report, provide a fifth source of information. The case studies enable an exploration of the richness, breadth and diversity of the schools' implementation of the Low SES NP initiatives. Significantly, the case study methodology provides insights into the ways in which contextual variables interact with conceptions by stakeholders and planning and delivery processes. The purpose of the case study exercise is to:

- Document, describe and rationalise the development and implementation of the initiatives or strategies that are being implemented by schools at the local level
- Understand the relationship that the Low SES SSNP has to the broader strategic direction of the school, contributions of other targeted funding programs as well as the overall goals and targets
- Identify resources used to implement initiatives, and the relationship between funding programs
- Develop insights into factors that enable success and to better understand the diverse and complex challenges facing schools in their implementation efforts
- Identify the effects of interest to this evaluation: the immediate effects of the particular initiative; the intermediate or indicator effects; and the effect on the overall learning and engagement of students as might be reflected in their performance
- Determine the impact and the extent to which initiatives have led to school improvement, in particular, in relation to reform areas
- Assess and identify the implications for sustainability, transferability and areas that may benefit from policy attention.

In this evaluation, the use of the collective case study to explore parent engagement programs at the school level allows for a stronger understanding of ways in which schools 'build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honour their contributions' (Henderson and Mapp 2002: 7), especially in sustaining connections that draw on and enhance the existing knowledge and understandings of the wider school community (Connell et al. 1991). Collective case study work supplements other forms of more generalised data analysis such as interrogation of large scale data sets, analysis of documentary material and

administration of surveys.

These case studies use a range of complementary strategies in developing a picture of a school's work with its parent community. One involves the recording and documenting of the quality and extent of a program's implementation, recording *measures of effective activity*. These measures may include numbers of parents attending events, development of registers for business partnerships, hours volunteered for the school and so on. Another approach is to try to *align activity with student outcomes* – that is, to construct connections between the activity and to changes in students' academic performance and other non-academic outcomes (in areas of transitions, attendance, behaviour and so on) over time. Another approach might focus on the *processes of partnership building*, recognising that the building of such partnerships is often incremental and gradualist and that school communities may experience clear phases in that building that may be documented and recognised as linked to change processes.

Researchers have pointed to the need for additional research to be undertaken on the specific issues encountered by Low SES families in their engagement with partnership programs, in particular differential rates of the impact of family support and involvement on academic success. There is an urgent need to better understand the dynamics of school external partnerships with parents and carers and the ways in which they connect, or fail to connect, with student outcomes. Through conducting a number of site-based case studies of parent-school partnerships (also known as a Collective Case Study) this evaluation aims to build a picture of how external partnership programs operate at the individual school level to address issues of family engagement with schooling. This allows a picture to be developed of the challenges faced by different school communities in instituting focussed partnerships with parents.

One objective achieved by conducting case studies is to 'generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic, program, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action' (Simons 2009: 21) This approach serves to build and deepen explanatory elements in evaluations, especially those dealing with large scale programs where information may also be derived from surveys or experimental strategies (Yin 1994: 15). Simons (2009: 23) articulates these strengths of case study approaches in evaluations:

- complexity of programs can be captured and understood within their own socio-political context
- multiple perspectives and key interventions can be documented by site
- processes and dynamics of change can be explored and documented for illumination of strong practice
- approach is flexible and responsive to local issues and can involve a range of methods
- is suited to 'feedback loop' of findings with participants to test and refine understandings and significance
- can include participants in research process – therefore highly appropriate for a study of partnerships.

The conduct of a collective case study does not require cases to be 'typical' of other cases; each will be 'unique'. This approach lends itself to particularly well to evaluations of school

external partnerships where we would expect schools to be engaging in an array of different activities reflecting their unique local context and circumstances. The collation of information from multiple case studies across a number of sites allows us to explore regional and cultural differences and assists in explaining and understanding how local factors influence the nature of school external partnerships. At the same time the process of undertaking multiple case studies of institutions engaged in like activities assists in identifying common issues and interconnecting themes across a number of schools (Simons 2009: 30-31). This provides the foundation for a rich picture of the scope of initiatives being implemented across the State, what successes and problems have been encountered and whether these may be common experiences across Low SES schools.

Evaluations of partnership programs are more likely to acknowledge the multiple levels on which partnership engagement may be assessed and understood. Researchers warn us for example about expecting too much from family and community involvement as a primary influence on students' achievements, pointing to findings that reading skills for example "are most affected by high quality instruction from skilled teachers" (Epstein 2009; Snow et al. 1998). It is paramount however for the evaluators to keep in mind the potential of family and community involvement to contribute in improving student outcomes across academic and non-academic domains including areas such as behaviour, resilience, attendance and transitions. For this reason our studies allude to other aspects of the NP initiatives outlined in school plans, especially those associated with the transformation of in-school learning environments.

3. Case Study: North Coast Public School

North Coast is a kindergarten to Year 6 government school catering for over 400 students in a small town in the mid North Coast region.

Prior to commencing the Low SES SSNP, the school was concerned about the quality of its relationships with families. Apart from parent and teacher meetings, the level of interaction between the school and parents was considered to be poor. The parent body was viewed by staff as divisive and the operation of the Parents and Citizens Association ineffective. Teachers were hesitant to interact with parents and tended to work independently of them.

Through the Low SES SSNP, the school aims to forge a stronger partnership with a diverse group of families and school community members. The school has developed a community engagement strategy based on a 'whole school approach', integrated into the overall school improvement plan. The key areas of focus are: creating time and space for collaboration; improving staff intercultural communication skills; responding in a more targeted and sensitive way to Aboriginal parents; greater effort to involve parents in teaching and learning; providing parent workshops and information sessions; seeking parent feedback and input; encouraging greater parental involvement in decision making and connecting the school with other education /training providers.

The specific strategies designed to support this focus are: appointing a senior staff member to oversee community partnerships and management of the Learning Community Centre; using the Learning Community Centre as a hub for parent meetings and workshops as well as community activities; employment of community paraprofessional staff; and using targeted professional development to help improve staff attitudes towards school and parent partnerships as well as communication skills.

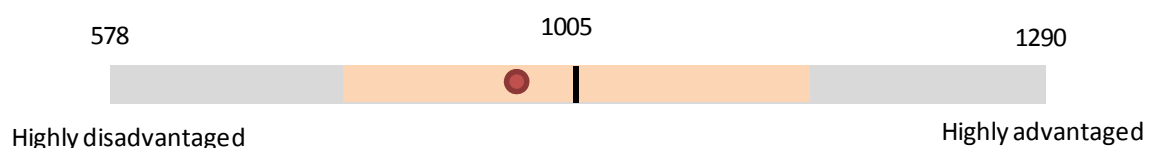
As a result of these initiatives, according to staff, the level of parental involvement has grown in the school, with increased parental confidence in interacting with the school. The school has been working to change the perception that parent involvement stops at the school gate, and according to parents that were interviewed there is evidence to suggest that this is changing. The P&C Association has become more effective with an increased number of people attending meetings and becoming more involved in school activities.

School profile

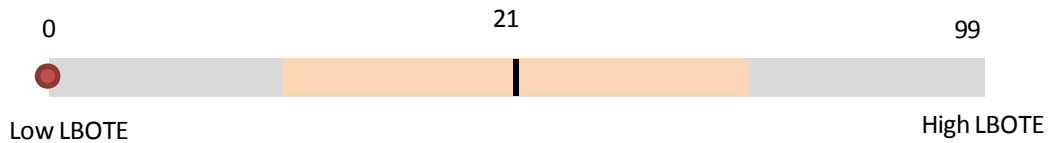
Student characteristics

The school's ICSEA value in 2010 was 912, which is below the state mean for all primary schools (1005). No students in 2010 were from language backgrounds other than English, while the state average is 21 per cent. Sixty-two students (15 per cent) identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, which is more than double the state average (7 per cent) for primary schools.

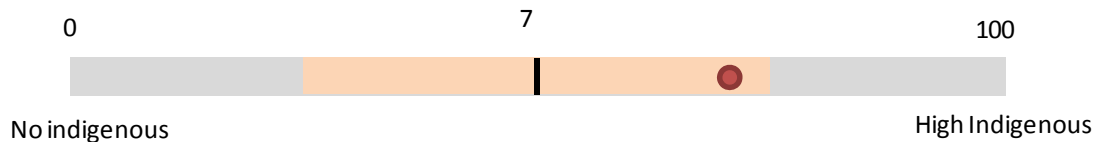
ICSEA=912



LBOTE=0%



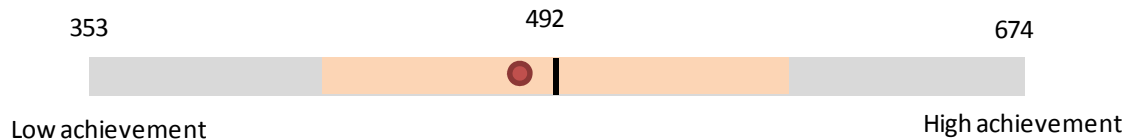
Indigenous=15%



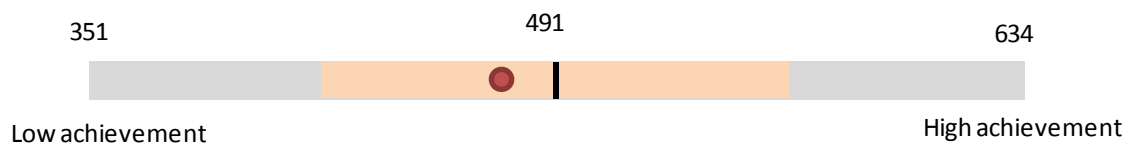
Student performance

The Year 3 and Year 5 student performance in NAPLAN indicated over-representation in the lower bands and under-representation in the higher bands for most areas of assessment. In 2010, the Year 5 NAPLAN mean scores in numeracy and reading were below the state averages. Compared to schools with a similar profile, however, the school's results were towards the top end for both reading and numeracy. The school's 2010 Year 5 NAPLAN numeracy score was 476. The school's 2010 Year 5 NAPLAN reading score was 485. North Coast's student attendance rate is 93 per cent, just below the state average of 94 per cent.

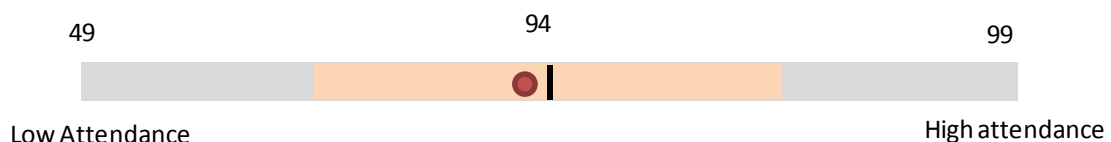
NAPLAN Year 5 numeracy=476



NAPLAN Year 5 reading=485



Student attendance=93%



Staffing and leadership

Principal tenure

There has been stability in the school's leadership. The principal, who has been at the school for over four years, has considerable experience working with disadvantaged school communities.

Staffing

The school has a total of 24 teaching and non teaching staff. There are three teachers and several paraprofessionals of Aboriginal descent. A group of staff has been at the school for more than 37 years and another group for more than 25 years. There are no recent graduates at the school. In comparison to other Low SES SSNP government schools North Coast Public School has:

- lower-than-average turnover of teachers (less than 1% in nominated period)
- older-than-average teacher workforce with 71.4 per cent of teachers 50 years or older compared with 42.9 per cent for government Low SES SSNP schools more broadly
- high proportion of long-serving staff, with 33.3 per cent of teachers in the current positions for more than 10 years, compared to a rate of 22.3 per cent for government? Low SES SSNP schools broadly
- lower than average number of leave days taken as sick leave per teacher (average of 5.8 days sick leave per teacher, a little below the average of 6.5 days for all government schools in the Low SES SSNP).

School income

Recurrent income

North Coast's annual recurrent income is \$4,489,012 with a per student net recurrent income of \$10,817.

Capital expenditure

The capital expenditure is \$1,834,059.

Low SES SSNP

The school entered the Low SES SSNP in 2010 and the current funding allocation is \$423,803.

Other funding

The school has also been receiving Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP)⁸ funding since

⁸ PSFP: provides additional assistance to school communities to reduce the achievement gap for students in schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The PSFP focuses on improving students' literacy, numeracy and participation outcomes. There are currently 574 schools on the PSFP: 429 primary schools, 84 high schools, 27 central schools and 34 schools for specific purposes. This represents approximately 145,000 students or 20 per cent of all students enrolled in government schools in NSW.

2009, which will conclude at the end of 2012.

Low SES SSNP initiatives

The school has been concerned about the quality of its relationships with parents and families. Apart from parent and teacher meetings, the level of interaction between the school and parents was described in interviews as poor. The parent body was described by some teachers as divisive and the operation of the Parent and Citizen Association ineffective. Teachers reported that they were hesitant to interact with parents.

In terms of external partnerships, the school's Low SES SSNP funding is being used to implement strategies to forge better and stronger relationships with a parent group that is quite diverse, including many Indigenous families.

The Low SES SSNP funding tied to external partnerships is being used to:

- release an assistant principal from teaching duties for 0.5 to focus on the coordination of the Learning and Community Centre (LCC) and the community engagement program as well as facilitation of professional learning, and connected learning.
- employ a Community Education Officer (CEO) (1.0 FTE)
- Employ a teacher (1.0 FTE) to coordinate programs delivered in the school's LCC.

The school does not allocate a proportion of funding for regional national partnerships coordination and support services. The principal expressed a desire for regular opportunities to dialogue and share practice with other schools in the region.

The school aims to take a 'whole school approach' to community engagement. The community engagement strategy is designed to be integrated into the overall school improvement plan. This strategy is facilitated through:

- newly created leadership role, the assistant principal, to improve communication between staff, parents and community
- employment of a CEO
- employment of staff to service the LCC. Staff coordinate the community engagement programs and facilitate teacher professional learning and connected learning.

The school's community engagement initiatives and strategies include a focus on:

- creating time and space for collaboration
- improving intercultural communication skills
- responding in a targeted way to Aboriginal parents
- involving parents in teaching and learning
- providing parent workshops
- seeking parent feedback
- involving parents in decision making
- connecting with other education /training providers.

Creating time and space for collaboration

The establishment of a LCC has been a major innovation at the school. The LCC is located in a connected classroom block and has video conferencing facilities and a computer laboratory. It functions as a 'one stop shop' or a hub for supporting student learning and engagement, professional development, and parent and community events and meetings. It is designed as a meeting place for parents and external agencies, Student Representative Council (SRC) and the school staff. The Assistant Principal, Teaching and Learning, oversees the operation of the LCC and has promotion of community engagement as a key role:

Having a non-teaching executive ... helps to make things work and the place is more positive with better communication between staff, parents and community (Assistant Principal).

The LCC Coordinator oversees the overall community engagement program, including the delivery of a range of services to students, parents and teachers. The LCC delivers programs to whole classes, to groups of students and to individual students with regard to Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs), literacy and numeracy programs and extra-curricular activities.

The school's Parent and Citizen Association meetings and other meetings with parental representation, such as the finance committee and the school evaluation team, are held in the LCC. Parent and community workshops and information sessions based on identified need and requests are delivered in the LCC.

The LCC is also a meeting place for personnel from agencies and groups within the local and wider area as well as personnel representing government and non government bodies. Community groups use the LCC free of charge (as the school benefits from the interaction with a wide range of community groups):

The power of that is that you have all these groups coming in and seeing the good stuff going on at the school. And it puts out the message that this is a community school. (Principal)

For example, the LCC has been used by a group called 'Women's Way' to hold meetings. These women have in return participated in the school's student tutoring program that aims to assist students with their learning and with homework. Some religious groups have also used the facilities such as the Salvation Army in relation to the Red Shield appeal. This organisation provides financial assistance to families at the school who are unable to pay for excursions.

Improving intercultural communication skills

The principal expressed a desire to enhance communication and the quality of interactions with parents/carers, in particular with Aboriginal families. To that end, staff members have been provided with professional development opportunities to enhance their intercultural communication skills and understandings.

The Aboriginal parents have a different way of communicating. When a person has a question of the school it will go through three or four people before it gets to me. So the way that these guys do it through word of mouth and communicating in the way they do really works. But issues rarely surface and this is due to the cultural

awareness of the teachers in the school. That is a change here. (Principal)

The professional development of staff has focused on developing deeper understandings of the home lives of many of the Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO) organised a three-day cultural awareness program for the staff which included visits to a number of Aboriginal organisations and concluded with an outing at the Discovery Park, travelling with rangers in canoes. According to the Principal, the end result was an increase in the school's knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Staff recognised the Aboriginal people are proud of their traditions and heritage.

The goal of the school is to improve staff intercultural communication skills and to deepen cultural knowledge in order to effectively implement PLPs for Aboriginal students. The school also seeks to design and implement teaching and learning programs that are culturally inclusive of Aboriginal students. Student understandings of and respect for cultural diversity is also being addressed through this goal.

And so it is crossing that bridge of: "This is what we are seeing in the school and what you can do to help us" to: "What is this child like at home and how can the school build on the child's interests and build their confidence?" (Teacher)

Responding in a more targeted way to Aboriginal parents

The principal indicated that a goal for the school in dealing with parents was to respond in a more sensitive and targeted way to different parent groups. The development of collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal parents is being pursued differently to that for other parents groups in the school, on the basis that "equity does not mean that everyone should be treated the same":

We would love to treat our whole community the same way but unless you've got the ability to engage your Aboriginal parents in the way that best suits them then that is the next best thing... While we'd love to get them into our Parent and Citizen Association it isn't going to happen yet. (Principal)

The school continues to work on investigating and implementing methods of achieving a greater level of Aboriginal parental involvement. The negotiation of a formal school-community partnership agreement is considered to be an important next step. This agreement will identify strategies to support student engagement, well-being and learning outcomes. An evidence based attendance strategy, including the identification of targets and means of achieving those targets, is to be developed with community input.

Involving parents in teaching and learning

The principal also described a stronger focus on working with staff to improve communication with parents and involve them in the educational efforts of the school. This involves encouraging staff members to be more open and available to parents, more responsive to their needs, and involve them more in the activities in classrooms.

There is still an 'us and them' which is still promoted in some areas of the school, but generally it is "all us" now. And with the way the teachers are so approachable, I just find it fantastic to work with them. (Principal)

Teachers organise orientation sessions at the beginning of the year to discuss curriculum and expectations of students, including those related to homework. Teachers often informally engage parents in the school. Reluctant Aboriginal parents, for example, are invited to discuss over a coffee in the local playground their children's PLPs. The assistant principal engages parents in matters related to student learning, based on discussions with staff at weekly scheduled meetings relating to students' needs, issues and progress.

Because I have the time to talk in depth they can feel comfortable, that they have been consulted and that their issue has been dealt with, and we get a better result. Before, there wasn't the time to sit down and work through the issue together. It gives you a calmer parent body because issues aren't being half dealt with and they feel like they've been listened to. (Assistant Principal)

Through increased interaction with parents on the school grounds or as a result of follow up by staff, parents are encouraged to take up the opportunity to participate in classroom activities (such as assisting in the Kindergarten to Year 2 classes with guided reading group work, changing readers, testing students on sight words and participating in gross motor skill development activities).

Our hovering parents, those who stand at the front gate, are now coming through. (Teacher)

Staff indicate it is easier to engage parents in the early years and involve them in 'fun activities'. According to a teacher 'literally hundreds of parents turn up to help with activities like dress parades and the Easter hat parade'. School assemblies are also popular with approximately 100 parents and community members attending. This positive response has been attributed to the tripling of the number of awards given to children and the doubling of student performances at assemblies. The school organises events of interest to parents. For instance, bush tucker days attract up to 30 volunteers to work on the barbeques.

Providing parent workshops

Between 10 and 20 parents, on average, attend workshops organised by the school. The workshops are developed in response to perceived needs and interests, and to date have included sessions on language and literacy learning; numeracy skill development; NAPLAN testing; positive parenting programs; transition to high school; teaching 'jolly phonics in the kinder'; and 'how to do reading in 5 minutes': Staff have developed a resilient attitude. Rather than "beating ourselves up about the low turn up of parents at workshops, we look at different ways of working with parents". (Assistant Principal)

The numeracy workshops, which were implemented because of the perception that parents were confused about the terminology used by students, attracted an average of 20 parents per workshop. Regional Office staff assisted with the implementation, providing parents with insights into learning at all stages and introducing games that could be played at home. Staff are currently gauging parent and carer interest in participating in literacy workshops.

Teachers and support staff invite Aboriginal parents to assist with the development and implementation of PLPs for their children. This planning process is designed to enable teachers, parents and students to develop common understandings about what is of interest and importance to students and how best to support them in their learning.

The parents come in to meet with the teacher so that we can get to know the family unit and what they see as being important in the home and what the interests are outside of the school setting...You may have an inkling but when you meet them you can really work out where everyone fits in, so it's great for us. (Assistant Principal)

Seeking parent feedback and input

The school uses a number of strategies to attain parent feedback and input.

Since 2011, hardcopy surveys have been administered three times a year and have been complemented by online surveys. According to staff, about 25 per cent of parents respond to these surveys which address matters of significance to the school, such as literacy and numeracy and school leadership. Surveys are used to obtain feedback about what is working and to inform future decisions. For instance, the school learnt that the Aboriginal community valued the work of Aboriginal staff in classrooms. But the school has also identified that there are limitations to the collection of data through surveys:

It's hard to know how much to overload parents with surveys. When I first started as CEO I sent out a survey about uniforms which opened up a can of worms about our white shirts. (CEO)

Focus groups are also being used by the school in a targeted way with different parent groups. The focus groups were described by the principal and staff as successful, "an effective approach as it enables the school to be more targeted in collecting information". At least two focus group meetings are held per year, one for parents and the other one specifically for Aboriginal parents. To encourage parents to freely express their views, teachers do not attend the meetings.

At one focus group meeting up to three pages of parent concerns (i.e. 27 concerns) were listed and it was reported to parents at the 2012 focus group meeting that the school had worked to address 90 per cent of their concerns. Actions taken by the school were published in one of the school newsletters. Where the school elected to take no action, parents were also provided with explanations.

One of our unwritten rules is that we send a parent home knowing that we are going to take some action and making sure they leave the school feeling that we are supporting them. (Principal)

The school held a focus group, off site, specifically for Aboriginal parents. The AEO played a key role in advertising the function and encouraging Aboriginal parents to attend. As a result of the promotion by the AEO up to 60 people attended. Lunch was provided in order to attract parents and create a more informal atmosphere. The focus group was held in conjunction with the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (QTIP), designed to collect and document family stories and traditions. According to the principal, Aboriginal families were enthusiastic about engaging in the project and were willing to provide feedback. The school used the opportunity to provide information about the school programs and approaches. Some parents, for example, were interested to learn that 'emergency lunches' were provided to students, and while some were keen for children to receive these lunches, they did not want their children to be stigmatised. Parents were informed of the opportunity provided for their children to be taught the local Aboriginal language at the school. Some parents expressed a desire for increased access to opportunities to engage with the local culture. To that end, a

whole school excursion was organised to enable students to listen to a range of Aboriginal people tell Dreamtime stories.

So the kids went away with the sense that the language they're learning at school is actually related to the whole culture of the Valley. It was an enormous learning and has become an annual event now... It was an extraordinary day, and also I am working with extraordinary people who have the capacity to pick up on that and put it into place. (Principal)

The focus group method is perceived to be a powerful way for connecting the school with parents and the community. For example, the principal learnt that he was perceived as too serious and unapproachable. To change this perception, he 'made a point of trying to be out in the yard at drop off and pick up times' and stood at the door for assemblies in order to greet people as they entered. This action, according to the Principal has had a massive effect in the way that people deal with him and their assumptions about staff have also been challenged.

The forums and the feedback from parents and the community have led to changes in the way the school is working to create a more welcoming climate.

We've got more people feeling more comfortable as a result... At first we thought we were just biding our time, but it has made a difference. There are very few angry parents here. They know that if they come here they are going to be listened to. (Principal)

Involving parents in decision making

According to the Principal, the school worked hard over the last few years to change the culture of the Parent and Citizen Association which "had been in tatters". The Parent and Citizen Association is operating effectively and working collaboratively with school leaders. Issues and concerns are freely expressed and addressed through clear meeting structures and processes.

The Parent and Citizen Association does not have a direct governance function. However, parents on the Parent and Citizen Association are also members of a range of other school committees, such as the finance committee, staff selection panels, and the school's evaluation team. Parent and Citizen Association members are provided with progress reports and input from school staff, including progress being made through the Low SES SSNP.

This P&C have been fabulous... They're willing to talk at a meeting and ask hard questions but not take stuff out of the meeting. At the last meeting they asked for a report on the National Partnerships, which was great. (Principal)

The Principal considers communication between the school and parents to have strengthened because of the increased level of discussion at Parent and Citizen Association meetings about school programs and the key issues impacting on teaching and learning. He considers it important to encourage and respond to suggestions. For instance, the workshop on Year 6 to Year 7 transition was organised in response to a request made by Parent and Citizen members.

Connecting with other education/training providers

The school is a member of a local network of schools. Staff representatives meet on a regular

basis to exchange information and to access common resources, such as the library and counselling services. School staff also showcase their schools and participate in shared events, such as concerts.

The school is aiming to strengthen its partnerships with early childhood providers with a view to improving its capacity to identify strategies to assess and facilitate readiness for school. School staff members have visited preschools to inform them of policies and programs, and opportunities have been created for staff to meet and share their knowledge.

Our preschool links have changed significantly from being almost nonexistent ... to a strong relationship. I found there were a lot of barriers up when I first went down there, but by chipping away those barriers have been broken down. (CEO)

Transition to secondary school is also an area for development. The level of interaction with the local government high school has increased due to a perceived need to collaborate on literacy and numeracy attainment and transition from Year 6. Interaction has been limited to transition of students to Year 7 (as up to 95 percent of the students attend the high school) due to differences in the leadership style of the two school principals, in particular, the approach to school and community relationships. According to the Assistant principal, the school's success with parents and community members has been due to the communication style of both the principal and the CEO. "They have gone about a level of communication with the community that is pitched at the level of understanding". The communication is focussed on providing a service and on facilitating feedback from parents about their perception of the school.

There are regular transition meetings with high school staff. Year 6 students attend the high school with a 'buddy' student and a video camera and report to their peers on their findings. Students from neighbouring primary schools visit the school to familiarise themselves with potential Year 7 students.

The school is beginning to establish a relationship with the local TAFE. In Term 3, 2012, a parent who works at the TAFE is delivering a session for the whole staff. The purpose of the session is to help the school to map the relevant agencies in the community and to identify contact people.

Low SES SSNP external partnership impact

School community members reported that the level of parental involvement has increased in the school. "Now, more and more, parents are coming out of the woodwork and being more overtly involved" (Parent). According to staff, larger numbers of parents have increased their level of confidence in interacting with the school. The aim has been to make parents feel more welcomed and have a sense of belonging. They are encouraged to play an important role in the education of their children:

At this school, it's not 'us and them'... it is much more about a partnership between the parents and the school because I feel I can discuss things with the teachers at any time, so I'm more involved. (Parent)

Based on the sample of parents that were interviewed, there is a perception that there has been a shift in the level of interest and involvement of parents:

When I first started there was more of a feeling, albeit small, of discontent about the school. I don't feel that anymore and slowly, over time, people have changed their views. (Parent)

The 'tone' of the school is perceived to have improved, parents are more likely to be in the school more often and at different times during the school day, and the number of fathers becoming involved in school activities is increasing. For the first time, males are assisting in the canteen. The operation of the Parent Citizen Association is more effective and a higher number of people are attending meetings and becoming involved in school activities:

With this current Parent and Citizen Association you will find different groups helping out with different activities because they call pull in a bigger pool of people and spread the workload more evenly. (Teacher)

Factors contributing to the success of the community engagement strategy include: whole school approach; LCC as a vehicle for a community based approach; roles of key personnel and targeted time allocations; and staff knowledge and attitudes.

Whole school approach

The whole school approach to parent partnership, including an increased emphasis on all teachers' involvement with parents and with community engagement, is an important factor. Because the school staff assist the AEO with home liaison the communication with Aboriginal parents has improved.

When I first came to this school the AEO approach was, 'you don't need to be involved with the Aboriginal community because that's our role.' But now it is much more a whole school approach. (Assistant principal)

LCC as a vehicle for community based approach

The LCC is an important vehicle for facilitating a community based approach in the school. It provides the context resources for community activity to take place in the school environment without disrupting the work of the school. It also provides a more inviting public space for parents and others to meet with each other and with school staff.

Roles of key personnel

The availability of staff to implement the community engagement strategy is considered essential for communication and collaboration. Setting aside the 'time' and therefore the resources needed to fund the 'time' is viewed as a critical element to the success of the approach. Teachers have become more comfortable with the increased emphasis on home and school communication.

Because we have the time we can be more proactive in addressing parent issues and concerns. When you're on a class full time you can't leave that class to address an issue immediately... (Assistant principal)

The employment of Aboriginal teachers and paraprofessionals is important also because of their strong links with the community, their cultural knowledge and their capacity to liaise effectively with the school community:

Out of all the schools I've been to it's one of the best relationships...I've never seen such open communication between the community and the AEOs and the staff. It is just incredible. (Teacher)

If there is a permission note that goes home and doesn't come back you can contact X and you know that we'll have the note within the day. I've been in places where the note doesn't come back and if there is an excursion they miss out, but that doesn't happen here. (Teacher)

Staff knowledge and attitudes

The improvement of staff intercultural communication skills and the development of a deeper cultural knowledge base are important platforms for the design and implementation of PLPs for Aboriginal students.

Similarly, intercultural communication skills are critical for the design and implementation of teaching and learning programs that are culturally inclusive of Aboriginal students and also improve other students' understanding and respect for cultural diversity. The principal believes that there is a high level of harmony in the school.

Kids now accept more that this is part of our history. The white kids take pride in knowing that we have a local Aboriginal history and culture. (Parent)

I think we're really lucky here in that a lot of our kids are colour blind. When we're looking for reconciliation photos it is not difficult because you've got black and white kids together, with arms round each other, best buddies. (Parent)

The enhancement of the skills and knowledge base of all staff is important for long term sustainability of the school's community engagement program strategy.

Conclusion

The Low SES SSNP has enabled the school to address concerns relating to its relationship with families and the broader community. A key mechanism for addressing these concerns was the development of a 'whole of school' community engagement strategy that is integrated into the overall school improvement plan.

The school recognised the importance of allocating sufficient low SES SSNP funds to facilitate the effective implementation of the community engagement strategy. Collaboration between the school and families has been enabled through not only the work of an assistant principal but also the LCC staff. The establishment of a CEO position has been a critical to the implementation of the school's community engagement strategy.

The community engagement strategy ensures that both parents and teachers are supported to meet the school's expectations and goals. Teachers have access to intercultural communication training and Aboriginal parents and carers have additional opportunities to be included in the life of the school.

The community engagement strategy has increased parental confidence in interacting with the school. More parents are participating in the life of the school, including Parents and

Citizen Association meetings.

4. Case Study: Valley Public School

Valley Public School is a kindergarten to Year 6 Government public school catering for around 240 students in the Hunter Central Coast region.

The school is aiming to improve its communication and partnerships with parents and the broader community. It has set targets to improve parents': level of satisfaction with the home and school communication; access to teachers; and input into decision making, as well as programs such as the transition program to secondary school. The school is also responding to parent concerns addressed at Parent and Citizen Association meetings and at parent and teacher meetings about a range of issues including perceived inconsistency in the provision and approach to homework, poor attitudes of teachers towards parents, and inadequate communication around what the school offers and how it makes decisions.

To enhance relationships with parents, families and the broader community a Community Education Officer position has been established. It is hoped that this will facilitate greater parent involvement in the school and a higher level of interaction between teachers and parents. One of the aims is to give parents greater awareness of school programs and what is going on at school by providing workshops.

In response to concerns about staff attitudes towards and communication with parents, the school is looking to develop strategies to help staff find ways of more actively listening to parents, gaining their feedback and input, and providing relevant information. Some strategies that have been developed in response to parent feedback include a review of the school's student welfare policy, the establishment of a transition to high school strategy, and implementing parent information sessions and workshops.

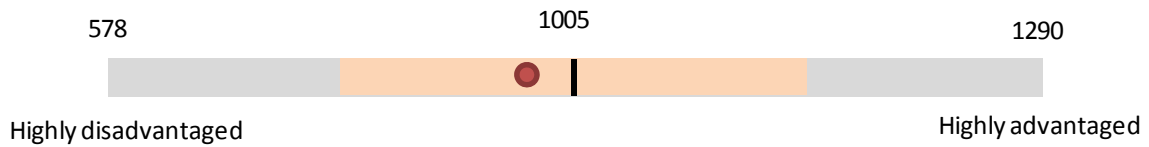
The school still faces a number of challenges. Many parents indicate that demanding work commitments and the pressures of life make it difficult for them to be involved in the school. The school is continuing to explore ways of connecting with hard to reach families and Aboriginal communities. Another challenge is managing the diversity of parent perspectives and interests.

School profile

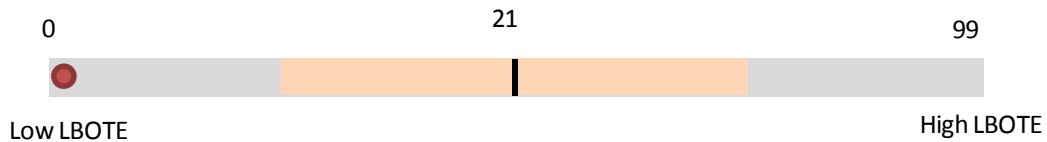
Student characteristics

The school's ICSEA value in 2010 was 950, which is below state mean. Three per cent of students came from LBOTE families, which is well below state mean (21 per cent). In 2010, twelve children (five per cent) identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, which is below state mean.

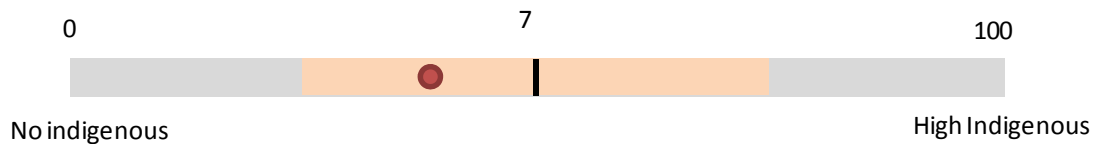
ICSEA=950



LBOTE=3%



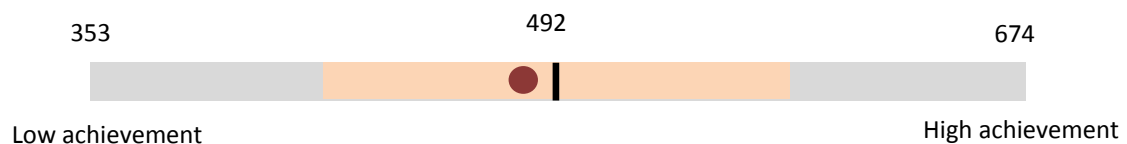
Indigenous students=5%



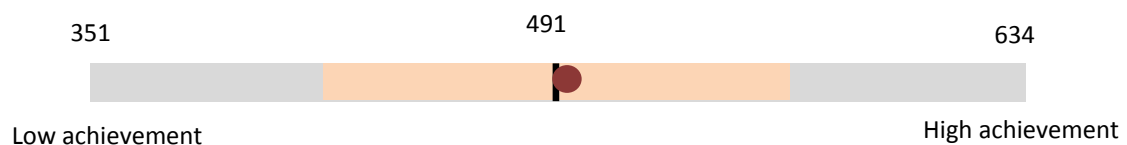
Student performance

The school's NAPLAN results are close to the mean for all schools in NSW? and above that of like schools. In 2010 the school's mean Year 5 numeracy score was 488. The school's Year 5 reading NAPLAN mean score was 501. The student attendance rate in 2010 was 94 per cent.

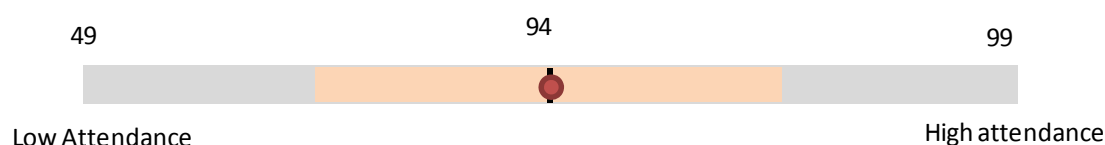
Mean Year 5 Numeracy score=482



Mean Year 5 Reading score=493



Attendance rate=94%



Leadership and staffing

Principal tenure

The principal has held the position since the beginning of Term 3 2012 and was a past member of the staff who sought additional leadership development opportunities in another SSNP school. The previous principal had completed a five-year contract and retired in the middle of 2011. The assistant principal held the relieving principal position for a year.

Staffing

The current staffing complement is 19 teaching and non teaching staff. Compared to the average for all government low SES SSNP schools Valley Public School has:

- lower-than-average turnover of teachers (7.1 per cent compared with 12.9 per cent)
- younger than average age profile of teachers, with a higher proportion of teachers aged 30 to 49 years (64.3 per cent compared with 48 per cent) and a correspondingly lower proportion of teachers 50 years or older (28.6 per cent compared with 42.9 per cent)
- slightly less experienced profile of teachers compared to the average, with more having three years or less service (28 per cent compared with 19 per cent), and fewer with 10 or more years experience (50.0 per cent compared with 61.0 per cent)
- Teachers with less experience at the school (in their current position) than average, with substantially more having been in their position for less than one year (28.6 per cent compared with the average of 13.6 per cent) and proportionately fewer having been in their current position for 10 years or more (7.1 per cent compared with the average of 22.3 per cent)
- average days of sick leave per teacher (9.1) somewhat above the average (6.5).

School income

Recurrent income

Valley Public School's annual recurrent income is \$2,458,675 with a per student net recurrent income of \$10,644.

Capital expenditure

The capital expenditure is \$2,128,923.

Low SES SSNP

The school entered the Low SES SSNP in 2011 and currently receives \$259,574. It has been in receipt of Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership funding as a Centre for Excellence since 2010, which will cease at the end of 2012.

Low SES SSNP external partnerships initiatives

The school aims to improve its communication and partnerships with parents and the broader community. It has set a target for at least 75 per cent of parents surveyed to report that the provision of regular communication is adequate in 2012 compared to 50 per cent in 2011.

A number of strategies have been developed to enable the school to enhance its relationship with parents:

- establishing a CEO position to improve communication with the school community and enhance parent engagement
- delivering parent information sessions / workshops
- improving effectiveness of the Parent and Citizen Association
- collaborating on student behaviour
- collaborating on transition to high school
- engaging with the broader school community

Community education officer

The school employed a CEO, using National Partnerships funding, in the middle of 2011 to work for one day a week. The CEO⁹ is considered to be an important link between the school, parents and the community. The CEO supports parents in their role as partners in education. Workshops and information sessions for parents are organised. School activities that are appropriate for parent participation are determined (such as participation in first aid training sessions and study skills day for students). The CEO attends Parent and Citizen Association meetings, and meetings between teachers and parents. She works with the school leadership team to identify needs and develop strategies for improvement. Parents are informed about school initiatives and consulted about planned changes.

Staff noted the impact of the work of the CEO. According to a teacher, “parents now feel more comfortable coming into the school”. Moreover, the number of parents becoming involved in the school has increased and type of interaction between parents has improved due to the efforts of the CEO.

I can see the parents who are now in Year 1, have come into the school in first term, and I can see that they are back again. (Teacher)

The CEO mediates between parents and teachers. She assists teachers in communicating with parents and supports them in the provision for special needs students.

Last year I had a girl in my class who ...had global delay ... The child needed to go to a lot of medical appointments and the CEO took her together with the father. And if it weren't for the CEO she would still be in a mainstream class instead of a special class at another school where she needs to be. (Teacher)

⁹ The CEO is also the Student Learning Support Officer for four days a week.

The CEO is focusing on positive parent contact. Each teacher is asked to provide her, on a weekly basis, with the name of one student. She contacts the parents to inform them about the progress being made by their children. To enable parents to become more involved in the day to day operation of the school, the CEO is developing a database on parent helpers and exploring opportunities for parents to actively participate in school excursions and school events.

Delivering parent information sessions / workshops

The school provides opportunities through workshops and other forums for parents to be informed about school programs and learning approaches and testing programs (such as NAPLAN, You Can Do It, and literacy and numeracy strategies). Parents were also invited to participate in school based activities, such as, first aid training and in establishing a school garden.

Parents were invited to attend workshops and were briefed about the programs and priorities of the school. They were invited to provide feedback and make suggestions about ways of improving the operation and performance of the school.

The feedback from the workshop was that it was fantastic and we need to do it more often ... asking them whether what we are doing at the school was going to make a difference. So the ball is starting to roll but it's only at the beginning. (Assistant Principal)

Improving effectiveness of Parent and Citizen Association

The school has responded to parent concerns about staff defensiveness at Parent and Citizen Association meetings and the communication processes. There is an acknowledgment that past issues have impacted negatively on partnerships. Many of the parents felt unwelcomed or uncomfortable in the school. The occurrence of several negative incidences in past years is considered to have caused a gradual rift between teachers and parents at the school.

For a lot of years we were almost wedging ourselves away from our parents at this school... There were dropping levels of communication and decreasing levels of involvement in school planning. The membership of the Parent and Citizen Association was fairly low. (Assistant Principal)

The Assistant Principal believes that parents are interested in working in partnership with the school with regard their children's learning (unlike parents with children in other schools who consider learning to be the school's responsibility). The school has identified a number of parent concerns. A central concern has been the time teachers spent absent from class, especially at the beginning of the year, undertaking training in Accelerated Literacy and the failure of the school to inform them about this development. Another concern was the quality of attendance monitoring and reporting.

To improve attendance at Parent and Citizen Association meetings, they have been scheduled to be held at different times of the day and the week to accommodate a broader range of parents. Different approaches to the operation of the meetings have been used to determine the most effective approaches.

We did have a session last year and it had a good turnout. There were different

tables set up to discuss different topics such as discipline, etc. Teachers were there to write down what we said and a few things have come out of that. (Parent)

The school is trying to respond to concerns and suggestions of parents. For example, school uniforms are being modified in response to parent survey responses.

Collaborating on student behaviour

The school has been working towards addressing concerns raised by parents about the adequacy of playground supervision and inconsistent approaches to student discipline.

My child at times can be one of those difficult children and yet in her circle when another child might do something similar to mine, that child doesn't get the same discipline meted out. (Parent)

One child will be suspended for something that another child will have done six times and never been suspended ... To me, that's applying the policy inconsistently. And it's not just the parents picking up on these inconsistencies. The kids know as well what they can and can't get away with. (Parent)

Staff have responded to the high frequency of playground incidences by taking a 'proactive approach'. The school's welfare policy has been revised, including the Gold Licence Behaviour System that emphasises rewarding positive behaviour. Two new school gold licence events are being implemented per term to support the individual class events.

They made the welfare policy last year and it is very clear. As a casual teacher you could pick it up and quickly know how it worked. (Teacher)

In addition, the school has improved reporting through the use of the SENTRAL¹⁰ to manage the student data. The electronic roll marking system has improved the efficiency and accuracy of student records. The school is implementing a number of other strategies to support student well being and improve its discipline system. The You Can Do It (YCDI)¹¹ program has been expanded to include the provision of champion awards, and the level of profiling of student achievement has been increased. The impact of efforts to support social, emotional and social skills is being continually monitored and programs such as, 'Rock and Water' and 'Seasons for Growth' continue to be implemented.

Collaborating on transition to high school

The school set a target to increase the level of parent satisfaction with the Year 6-7 transition program from 38 percent in 2011 to 65 percent in 2012. This target was set in response to parent feedback. An increased level of interaction is considered to be critical for improving the transition of students into secondary school.

¹⁰ SENTRAL: a web-based, modular School Administration, On-line Learning and Student Management software suite designed for use in Primary and Secondary schools

¹¹ YCDI: a school-home collaborative approach for developing the social and emotional capabilities of students of all ages. YCDI helps students develop 12 positive Habits of the Mind (e.g., self-acceptance, high frustration tolerance, acceptance of others) and eliminate negative Habits of the Mind (e.g., self-depreciation, low frustration tolerance, lack of other acceptance) as well as teaches students how by changing their thinking, they can influence their emotions and behaviours.

The school has been working collaboratively with staff in the nearby high school to facilitate the transition for students. The new high school principal is considered to be most proactive in building a relationship with the school. He provides information for inclusion in the school's newsletter and has attended Parent and Citizen Association meetings. The principal is hopeful that the primary school students will have increased access to opportunities to visit and participate in high school activities.

When I took the kids to this high school for the first time the other day there were a lot of anxious kids and there were some kids who didn't even come because they were so scared about going. (Teacher)

The school is exploring opportunities to engage in joint planning with other schools and is ensuring that staff are available to participate in network meetings and activities, such as, professional learning and program development initiatives.

Engaging with the broader school community

Staff indicate that the school is aiming to engage with the wider school community. There is recognition that the school's knowledge of resources that can be accessed in the community needs to improve. Local businesses, community organisations and preschools could be involved in teaching and learning

We're at our very early stages in terms of engaging what I would call the true community of our school. (Teacher)

There is a focus on not only reaching out into the wider community but also bringing the community into the school. For example, the school holds community information sessions to enable local businesses and community groups to promote the work of their organisations. The school is maintaining its relationship with the University of Newcastle in relation to the provision of placements for teacher professional learning through practicum and internships and access to up to date research evidence and resources.

Partnership challenges

The challenges facing this school in framing its strategies for engaging with its parent community have been identified as:

- uneven engagement of parents in the school, with a concern that some groups' voices may not be heard
- managing parent perceptions and expectations of school
- supporting Aboriginal community connection
- partnering with hard to reach parents.

Uneven engagement of parents in the school

Staff noted in interviews that some parent groups are less active than others in the school. For example, parents of students in the upper levels of the primary school are much less likely to take active participatory roles.

It's not like we don't encourage them. We've put it out there all the time but it is

hard to get them to come in. Even trying to talk to them over the phone, there are times when you just can't get in contact with them. (Teacher)

Demanding work commitments, pressures and challenges in the personal lives of parents are seen as barriers to parental involvement. These demands impact on the time parents have to work with the school.

Managing parent perceptions and expectations of school

Better management of parent concerns and perceptions has also been important for the school. Not only might parents have diverse expectations about matters such as playground supervision, parent roles in their classrooms and the school, homework and attendance management but the school has noted the tendency of a limited group of parents to dominate discussions about such matters, sometimes with negative impacts on other parents and teachers. Similarly the school has had to address negative parent perceptions about the staff attitudes to engagement with the school community:

If the teachers aren't willing to get involved then the kids won't want to be involved and then the parents won't get involved. For example, with our disco it was like pulling teeth to try and get the teachers along. (Parent)

Supporting Aboriginal community connection

Unlike Aboriginal groups in other parts of the Central Coast region, Aboriginal families in Valley School have come from various parts of the state. None of the families are directly associated with the traditional people of the land on which the school is located. These families are therefore perceived to be not only disconnected from the school but also their community – many do not choose to identify as being of Aboriginal descent.

The school's culturally inclusive strategies are encouraging students to acknowledge and value their Aboriginal heritage and connection with their community more broadly. The Year 6 teacher who is also the President of the Aboriginal Education Committee Group (AECG)¹² is a strong supporter of Aboriginal education in the school and community. Staff indicate that students are increasingly willing to identify as Aboriginal because they feel more comfortable about their heritage. The increased level of identification has resulted in an increase of the Aboriginal student population, from an enrolment of 20 students a few years ago to current enrolment of 93 students.

Partnering with hard to reach parents

Some staff indicate that some parents do not become involved because they do not identify with the school and / or believe that it is their role to become involved in education. The demands and pressures of life and work can also limit the capacity for parents to be involved in the education of their children.

One family has eight children and my student is the third youngest. The family's main concern is the new business. The attitude of the parents is that they understand their child's learning issues but that he'll get over it "because our other children did." (Teacher)

¹² AECG: an Aboriginal, community controlled, independent, not for profit advocacy group.

Parents' lack of or limited literacy and numeracy skills and more generally negative experiences of schooling of their own, are perceived to be a barrier to school and home communication.

I don't think many of them (Aboriginal parents) have been through the experience of having seven years at school (Teacher).

Conclusion

The school identified its key concerns with parent partnerships as uneven engagement within the parent community; a culture of relatively low engagement on the part of parents generally, an indigenous community without strong connections to the location or broader community and particular difficulties in engaging with hard to reach parents.

Use of National Partnerships funding to appoint a Community Engagement officer on a fractional basis has been one strategy that has enhanced the volume and quality of parent engagement in the school.

Opportunities for parents to participate in the life of the school have been extended through more systematic approaches to parent volunteering and through the delivery of a number of parent information sessions and workshops. These strategies, together with the introduction of more focussed outlines of attendance, welfare and reporting arrangements have assisted in addressing parents' concerns about inadequate understanding of school policies and practices.

The school has adopted new approaches to consultation and has extended parent access to Parent and Citizen Association meetings through scheduling those meetings at times and dates better calculated to accommodate a broader range of parents. There has also been experimentation with consultation strategies within those formats. As a result numbers attending such meetings have grown and parents report activity resulting from consultations.

Teachers and parents report a positive shift in the nature of the relationships between the school and its parent community – attributable to some of the strategies outlined above: So the ball is starting to roll but it's only at the beginning. (Assistant Principal)

5. Case Study: Catholic Primary School

Catholic Primary is a co-educational kindergarten to Year 6 Catholic systemic school in the Southern Region of the Archdiocese of Sydney. The school's enrolment increased from 651 in 2010 to 670 in 2011, and contains many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The school aims to strengthen its relationships with parents and its broader community through the Low SES SSNP.

A key challenge for the school is to manage the diverse parent groups and to ensure that 'the range of voices' are heard and included. In particular, the school is attempting to build the confidence of LBOTE parents and to encourage them to take on a stronger role in the education of their children. Some of the barriers to parent participation are also being addressed, for instance, exploring suitable times, places and types of activities that will engage parents.

Recent building and refurbishment projects at the school have limited the access of school community members to the school grounds. Additionally, the Parent and Friends model was seen to have been a barrier to the participation of culturally and linguistic parent and community groups. As a result parent participation was limited to attendance at scheduled report evening meetings and conventional volunteer roles.

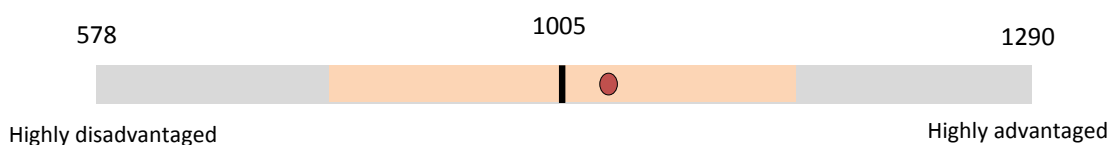
The Low SES SSNP has enabled the school to employ a parent education coordinator to develop and manage the partnership strategy. A key activity is to support parents to implement the home reading programs. Parents and families are supported to model literacy and numeracy learning in the home. Regular parent forums are organised providing them with opportunities to learn about school programs and to develop specific skills. The school also disseminates regular newsletters that focus on assisting parents to support their children's learning in the home. Workshops are designed for specific groups of families in the school.

School profile

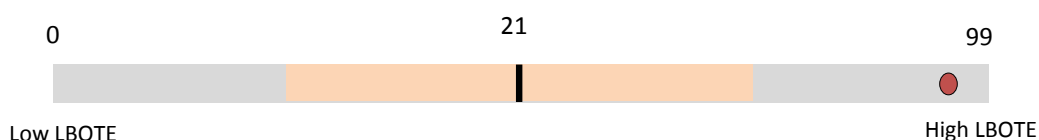
Student characteristics

The school's ICSEA value was 1016 in 2010, which is above the state average. The students at Catholic Primary come from the local parish community and the immediate local area. Many families are associated with the local church; there are however some non-Catholics in the student body. The overwhelming majority of students (95 per cent) come from language backgrounds other than English. Vietnamese, Assyrian, Chinese, South American, Arabic and Filipino have made up substantial groups within the population. More recently African families, some from refugee backgrounds, have begun to attend the school. Zero per cent of students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2010.

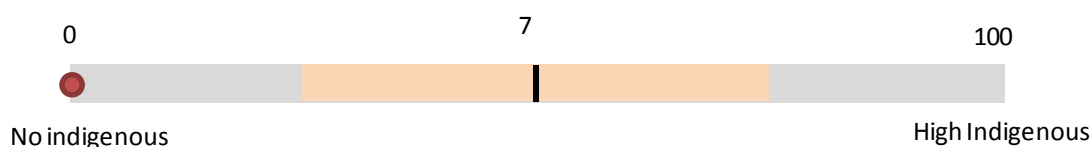
ICSEA=1016



LBOTE=95%



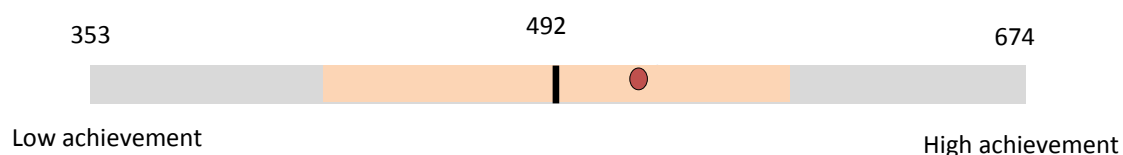
Indigenous students=0%



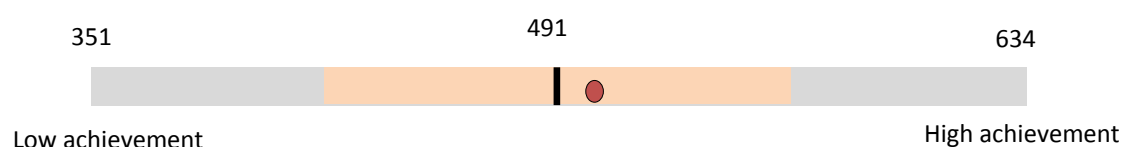
Student performance

The 2010 Year 5 NAPLAN results indicate that 95 per cent of students achieved at or above National Minimum Standards (NMS) in reading and 97 per cent of students achieved at or above NMS in numeracy. Students are performing strongly at both Year 3 and 5 levels in the top band and are markedly underrepresented in the two bottom bands. The school's Year 5 NAPLAN numeracy score was 521 compared to the state average of 492. The school's Year 5 NAPLAN reading score was 504 compared to the state average of 492. The school's 2010 attendance rate was 94 per cent.

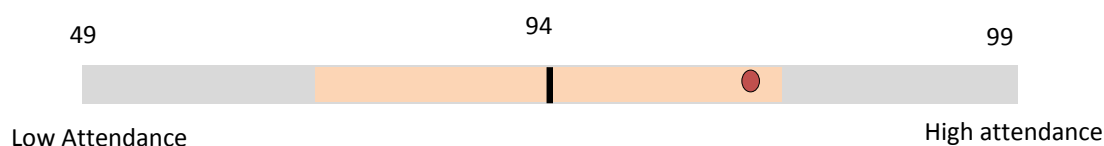
NAPLAN Year 5 numeracy=521



NAPLAN Year 5 reading=504



Student attendance=96%



Leadership and staffing

Principal tenure

The current principal has been with the school since 2008 and is familiar with its community. He is a principal of 16 years standing.

Staffing

The current staffing complement is 40 teaching and 17 non teaching staff. This equates to an FTE teaching staff of 34.8 and an FTE non-teaching staff of 9.7. There is a varied level of experience in the staff group, ranging from graduate teachers through to highly experienced teachers. Some teachers have been with the school more than 20 years; others, including a number of members of the leadership team, are comparatively new to the school and have been appointed within the last three years.

School income

Recurrent income

The school's annual recurrent income, based on 2010 figures, is \$5,956,967 with a per student net recurrent income of \$9,150.

Capital expenditure

The capital expenditure is \$3,333,547 for 2010, reflecting the strong building program that characterised the school's landscape from the mid 2000s.

Low SES SSNP

The school entered the Low SES SSNP in 2009. In 2011 it received \$653000 as part of the SSNP initiative.

Low SES SSNP external partnership initiatives

In terms of external partnerships, Catholic Primary's Low SES SSNP initiatives are focused on building parent engagement in the teaching and learning activities of the school and in enlisting parent support for their children's learning at school and at home.

The school's rationale for this focus is that some students find it difficult to engage with some aspects of literacy due to family backgrounds with limited exposure to English language support. Recognising that their students are starting from a relatively high functional base,

with good outcomes already recorded for literacy and numeracy, the school's focus is on deepening literacy learning and on supporting families in modelling numeracy and literacy learning in the home. The Low SES SSNP enabled the school to increase its focus on the improvement of reading skills, including those skills necessary for numeracy skill development.

The literacy in numeracy is what causes us problems... This is improving...but we know you can't rest on your laurels and we know there may not be good modelling for numeracy at home. With reading the issue is inferential – possibly they can read fluently but can they comprehend and read between the lines? (Principal)

In 2011 the Low SES SSNP funding allocation of \$653,000 was used to enable the implementation of quality programs and support community engagement through:

- employing a Teacher Educator to support school staff in the implementation of quality literacy and numeracy learning strategies (such as explicit use of oral language/vocabulary development activities in teaching programs)
- providing specialist executive staffing to support teacher teams in professional learning and releasing teachers for program development, implementation and evaluation
- implementing whole school programs in reading, numeracy and using the School Measurement, Assessment and reporting Toolkit (SMART)¹³ data
- employing a parent engagement coordinator (0.2 FTE) to promote community and parent engagement
- networking across schools and engaging facilitators for community engagement programs.

The Catholic Education Office, Sydney, also coordinates key NP activities and facilitates network meetings for principals, teacher educators and other relevant personnel. At the interviews, school staff reported that in their view the school's relationships with parents and its broader school community were already strong. This is affirmed by parent comments on their rationales for choosing the school:

It's got a good reputation and the principal, because he's a Brother, there's not many schools around with that spirituality.

...This is the church we come to and we wanted to be part of that community and the

¹³ The School Measurement, Assessment and reporting Toolkit (SMART) system is a power diagnostic tool that provides feedback on the NAPLAN results to NSW schools and their communities. The tool reports on a range of data for each of the five test scales of NAPLAN (i.e. reading, writing, grammar and punctuation, spelling and numeracy). Numeracy sub-scales have also been developed to provide additional analysis for diagnosis and planning purposes (i.e. numeracy, pattern and algebra and measurement, data, space and geometry). The web-based SMART system also reports on Essential Secondary Science Assessment (ESSA) results and is available to schools as a centralised system and is accessed through the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) portal. Principals and their dedicated officers are responsible for providing and maintaining access to SMART for the staff at their school. Schools are able to display the performance of individual students, compare performance of students in Year 3,5,7 and 9 and analyse changes and trends over time.

kids to be part of that community and the principal had a big impact on that decision as well.

It's a small-knit community; we're all involved and see the same people everywhere, whether in church or school.

There is a waiting list for enrolments and the school, according to the Principal, enjoys considerable esteem in its community. What the leadership hoped to do in developing their plan for the Low SES SSNP, however, was to take these elements as a base to build, first, stronger parent engagement and participation in the school and second, a relationship centred more clearly on a teaching and learning partnership between home and school.

There were a number of reasons why this parent-focused strategy was seen to be needed at this point. The school was coming out of an extended period of building and refurbishment undertaken in the mid-2000s. Over the course of that time different sections of the grounds and premises had been inaccessible to members of the school community for occupational health and safety reasons, building over time a general impression of distance and inaccessibility – of “barriers, gates and fences” (parent interview). Second, the conventional Parents and Friends (P&F) model of parent engagement did not necessarily meet the needs of a parent community characterised by significant cultural and linguistic diversity, a limited ability to participate in standard “engagement” activities such as fund raising, and demonstrated diffidence about taking a directive role in education-focused processes and practices that may not have been well understood by many. As a result parent participation was limited to attendance of scheduled report evenings and conventional volunteer roles:

When I came here there wasn't a lot happening with parents... It was very hard for parents with their ethnic mix to take on lead roles so that was also an issue.
(Principal)

Third, the arrival of the new principal signalled the opportunity for developing or building the sense of a warmer, more open and accessible relationship between school personnel and families and community. It was an appropriate time to build some explicit policy around parent partnerships that drew more fully on current needs and expectations of the parent community and how these might be leveraged to enhance the school environment and children's outcomes.

The Low SES SSNP provided an opportunity to act on these themes, according to the staff interviewed at the school. In 2009 with the support of the Catholic Education Office the school undertook a focused parent survey ('Your School, Your Voice') that “gave us a lot of data of what parents were looking for”. The survey drew on a broad cross section of parents, and translators were brought in “across a lot of different nationalities” to ensure that all voices were heard. From this exercise, parents reported that they wanted the school to show them

How to be involved how to help their children with reading and all subjects really including religious education, how to help them be better people, how to work with them on behaviour management and parenting skills to complement what was going on at school – just to help them connect better with what was going on at school, not just turn up at the token open classroom once a year. (Principal)

This gave the school some guides to new ways of working with parents. While the focus

initially had been to address strategies for stronger parent engagement it was becoming clear to school leadership that this arm of the NP would dovetail into its overall literacy strategies.

In the first year of the NP the school ran a number of parent forums on themes such as assessment, religious education, and technology in schools and so on, using these opportunities to highlight new aspects of the school's curriculum or resources.

In terms of external partnerships undertaken under the Low SES SSNP, key strategies may be separated into the contextual and the targeted. Contextual strategies include whole-school approaches to interactions with the parent community and encompass policies on parent helpers in classrooms (now encouraged), welcoming of parents at morning assemblies and other school events, specific inclusion of parents in the religious life of the school as in provision of opportunities for prayer and meditation during the school day, and the contribution of teachers to information evenings or daytime sessions for parents. Targeted strategies – and these can be more clearly identified as funded under the NP – include the appointment of a PEC as a member of the executive team, the use of specifically targeted externally provided programs such as 'Sing and Grow'¹⁴ and 'Mercy Works'¹⁵ to address needs of particular sections of the parent community, the specific provision of customised newsletters to support parents' activities in sharing in children's learning at home (including development of translated copies), and the delivery of regular parent forums on education or parenting themes.

The school is implementing the following initiatives:

- appointment of a Parent Engagement Co-ordinator (PEC)
- the delivery of regular parent forums on learning matters,
- the instigation of a specifically targeted newsletter to support parents in assisting with their children's learning and
- the introduction of a number of programs aimed at the engagement of specific or higher-need parent groups within the school community.

Appointment of parent engagement coordinator

A PEC was appointed in 2011 as part of the executive team with the task of developing an extensive engagement strategy built around the 'parents-as-learning-partners' model.

In this role the PEC works with the Catholic Education Office (CEO) in sourcing and introducing programs that meet the needs of this specific school community – such as the 'Sing and Grow' program, a preparatory and transition program for mothers and very young children aimed at developing "school readiness" and learner engagement. As the principal has noted, this support and advice from the CEO has been important in securing well targeted approaches:

¹⁴ Sing and Grow: a preparatory and transition program for mothers and very young children aimed at developing "school readiness" and learner engagement

¹⁵ Mercy Works: a program of the Catholic order, Sisters of Mercy, supporting local and overseas relief and development activities.

Sing and Grow – I wouldn't have known about that – parents think it's great and children who come into the school from that already feel part of the school community...

Appointment of a designated position is seen as essential to maintaining the focus of this role in the school. The principal makes several points on this theme – first that the work would not get done without allocation of a specific role, second the importance of this role being located in the leadership team and third the intention that this will be retained, if at all possible, once the Low SES SSNP funding has ceased.

The role of PEC is currently allocated to an executive teacher as 0.2 FTE of her load. Her role is strategic: to explore how parent engagement in the school's learning community may be increased and to deliver programs and opportunities that will support the engagement needs of diverse groups of parents. This position enables the school to specifically focus on parent engagement.

Children are our key concern but we know that by engaging parents in their learning it does have benefits for children and that is what we do have to look at; it will benefit the children. We need to help the teachers to keep it as a priority and to be aware that it does connect directly with the children. (Principal)

Use of brokered programs

The school makes use of assistance from the Catholic Education Office in sourcing and securing specific programs that are considered appropriate for school needs. Among these, as noted, are the 'Sing and Grow' program for preschool children and their parents and the 'Mercy Works' support of extra-school learning support for designated students in need. Some programs such as 'Sing and Grow' connect very closely with parent engagement strategies, building confidence of isolated mothers in particular in preparing their children for social and educational transitions involved in starting school. The program has been popular with parents and although initially offered as a several-week option only, is now running strongly in its second year. Other schools have drawn on the example of this program in establishing their own delivery on other sites. The principal and PEC both refer to the role played by the Catholic Education Office in brokering specific programs and in drawing their attention to other programs or activities that may be of interest in their overall parent engagement strategy.

Delivery of parent forums

A key initiative the PEC has instigated to build parental involvement entails the delivery of regular day and evening 'internet cafes' for parents on themes such as information and communication technologies, assessment, literacy learning, numeracy, parenting, and transition. The principal, teachers and parents all nominated internet cafes as one of the most striking features of recent years in terms of building parent involvement in the school and in children's learning.

The cafes are held during the day and in the evenings and are conducted once every few weeks. These sessions can involve between 30 and 50 parents for some sessions. Other forums, such as one recently held on restorative justice, see attendance from staff as well as parents, especially those conducted in the evenings.

Classroom teachers deliver these sessions according to their expertise and availability (the teacher engagement coordinator takes their class to provide release opportunities for daytime sessions).

It has been important to have different teachers play this role as workshop coordinators and authorities; it allows them to connect with parents as education leaders but also signals to parents that they are considered partners in the relationship – they are not working just with the “parent coordinator” or other liaison officer. The strategy does rely strongly on goodwill and motivation of teachers – and of parents. At the time of the school visit a parent forum was due to be held that evening and up to 30 parents and 10 teachers were expected to attend. The teachers’ role was to present and facilitate group discussions:

I’m aware that is a big ask of teachers but that’s what we are doing. It’s much better to have the teachers talking to parents about what they are doing in their classrooms than having an external facilitator come in to take the workshops. The teachers are doing this over and above their standard classroom commitments. (Principal)

Staff discussed in interviews the importance of these forums in building a shared understanding between school and home. The school has held forums on topics, such as, pastoral care, restorative practices, and discipline and behaviour management. Parents have been informed about strategies used by the school to resolve conflict. The hope is that parents, too, will implement these strategies at home.

Kids would get a consistent message and would be more able to work and less distracted in class... It supports what we are doing in class too, working in partnership with a similar message. (Teacher)

Parent forums have also addressed literacy learning and student assessment. The forums have provided the school with the opportunity to discuss with parents the home reading program and to “let them in on the secrets, like strategies for assisting reading, using the same terms, and equipping them with strategies so the child is getting double and better help faster and sooner!” (PEC). Parents have also had access to information related to numeracy and mathematics strategies.

It’s not a tension between the teacher and the parent; we are on the same page and using the same language. Then homework isn’t this nasty black thing that sits in the corner and consumes family relationships. (PEC)

Parents interviewed as part of the field work for the case study reported that they saw value in these sessions in building their skills and confidence in providing support to their children in homework or in communication with the school more generally:

I like it because they give you the notes so you can take them home – so one was for reading – how do you engage with the reading, how do you help your child understand what things are about, what can I do to help my child know what she is reading? So they give you an outline, a guide... (Parent)

Yes, and they give techniques on how to help your child with their reading and also other areas like maths and writing. Because you want to help them and you don’t know – are you helping them too much, not enough? Or are you, you know, not helping? You don’t want to overload them, or make them dislike the subject (Parent)

Provision of newsletter

The PEC has also developed a specific newsletter, distinct from the school's standard newsletter, aimed at supporting parents to increase engagement in their child's learning. This newsletter is also offered in a Vietnamese translation. It is different from the school newsletter in presentation, layout and font size. The content is also posted on the school website for parent access.

So if parents wanted to know what was going on in school and how to help their children – plus ICT and cyber bullying etc – well they are able to do so, they do know what is happening at school. (Principal)

Parent helpers in classrooms

Many schools make use of parent helpers in classrooms to help with reading activities and to assist teachers in management of learning activities.

In this school, teachers and parents suggested parental involvement in this way was not pursued in earlier years. The school has taken steps to bring parents back into the classroom to support teachers and has attempted to do this in structured ways that address safety and other requirements and allow parents to play a clear role that recognises current demands of classroom support. As such the school has conducted purposive sessions to prepare parents who want to play that support role – assisting in management of their official paperwork, advising on expectations of the role and providing specifically focused advice for parents volunteering to work in reading support in the K-2 program in providing sessions on reading strategies. There were also opportunities for parents who chose not to assist in classrooms to attend information sessions on topics, such as, occupational health and safety and child protection requirements.

(The school) really got us to understand what was involved. We had to do that anyway but it really organised people into the mindset of being involved. (Leadership interview)

According to the Principal, the school's active encouragement of parents has led to an increase in the number of classroom helpers. The PEC and the Teacher Educator have supported teachers in their efforts to involve parents in their classrooms, by modelling specific strategies and encouraging them to develop a positive attitude to parent helpers.

Other external partnerships

The school's relationship with the Catholic Education Office allows it to build a range of partnerships with external bodies in areas of welfare and support. The 'Bluearth' Program, for example, aims at improving young people's health, behaviour, self-esteem, confidence and academic achievement. Catholic Care provides targeted forum opportunities for older students and their parents to discuss issues such as adolescence and choices. 'Sing and Grow' has been delivered in the school over two years and generates strong support in the school community generally. Other Catholic school communities in the region and beyond have come together to share strong practice in community engagement strategies and scalability in areas such as family engagement – in this capacity the school connects closely to another local school in sharing strategies about specific programs. These are other external partnerships that benefit the school, its staff and students in strengthening community connections.

The school also connects with universities—primarily the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Notre Dame—in the delivery of targeted programs for specific groups of children and for staff. Some examples include, LBOTE and student learning strategies and special needs learning strategies.

Partnership challenges

Although the school has undertaken a number of strategies to build and extend learning partnerships with parents, school leaders and teachers nominate key challenges now facing them in managing an evolving and deepening relationship with their parent community. They include: redefining parameters of relationship; accommodating community capacity and aims; and better recognising the parent voice in project direction.

Redefining parameters of relationship

While the school emphasises that parent partnership approaches and strategies have been guided by feedback from parents at the commencement of National Partnership planning two years ago, there is acknowledgment that such partnerships may prove challenging for both parents and teachers.

Parents, for example, particularly those unfamiliar with Australian school systems or constrained by limitations of their own English language skills, may not believe they are able to support their children in literacy or numeracy learning:

The parents – they trust the school and they have always trusted what we’re doing but they don’t see themselves as capable -- they wanted more help with helping their children ...because of the language barriers.

The school has therefore focused on parents’ confidence building in 2011. One focus has been on strategies that parents can use when English language abilities are very limited and where very little English is employed in the home; parents in those contexts have been inclined to report that they see this as a strong disadvantage for their children. The school therefore has aimed to “break down some of that language issue and assure them they could do well with helping their kids even if their English is not good (Teacher Educator).”:

(Last week) we ran a reading session for the parents and I brought along a book that showed one part of the language was Arabic and the other part was English. We were trying to show how they could speak in their tongue and the child could respond and it was the first time that they had seen that the barriers could be overcome —that these books actually existed – so they were more comfortable.

We come from a perspective saying that it’s important to speak with your mother tongue and if that’s what they feel comfortable with, then use that. (We used) a beautiful book by Jeannie Baker where she puts the Arabic language along with the Australian language and I noticed last week that these parents felt much more at ease; they felt that the language barrier was broken down. So there is a partnership happening, not just from the school perspective but when they go home that continues when they use books like this. (Teacher Educator, PEC)

The perspective is shared by teachers who play a major role in delivery of parent information programs and workshops provided in internet cafes and other formats:

Lately – the internet cafes and forums – we have done forums on assessment, English literacy, numeracy, religious education, and the flavour of the ones we are doing now is “This is what we do here but this is what you can do at home. At home you can do this...” (Teacher)

Teachers emphasised too the importance of parents integrating learning opportunities into day to day activities; in parent workshops for example the Teacher Educator met with parents and provided “practical ideas about when you’re cooking you can do all these things at home to help your kids with literacy and numeracy, and they thought ‘Oh yes we can do that,’ like baking or reading recipes that sort of thing and so they were feeling a bit more assured, that they would be doing purposeful activities to help their children.” (PEC)

Acknowledging community capacity and aims

In its approach to parent engagement the school aims to manage relationships in ways that are responsive to parent needs and respectful of parents’ capacity to engage. Some basic involvement is mandated for all parents – start of year information evenings, for example, are compulsory and around 95 per cent of parents attend. Parent teacher evenings are similarly well subscribed. But as the principal makes clear, the school knows its parent community well and understands the limits to many parents’ capacity for involvement. In many families both parents work, often in employment that involves long hours and low pay. Their time is limited and other demands on their time may be intense.

Given that the parent engagement strategy is focused on parents’ roles in assisting with their children’s learning through information dissemination and support, there needs to be flexibility of provision – such as in daytime and evening sessions of internet cafes – and the provision of alternatives for those who cannot attend. Here the use of a special-purpose parents’ newsletter, quite distinct from the school’s official newsletter, is important.

Recognising the parent voice in project direction

Some schools align parent engagement with the active involvement of parents in decision making and school governance. At Catholic Primary the school has instigated a culture of feedback and evaluation in its dealings with parents, seeking feedback from all training and information sessions and building a response base on which to design and deliver more refined and targeted engagement approaches. However, at this point there has been no attempt made to reinstate or enhance a P&F structure, given parents’ variable English language skills and the diversity of language groups represented within the school. This may change in coming years as parents become more conversant with education processes and structures and with the thinking behind school planning (teacher interview).

For the present it is felt that a Parent and Friends model will not accord with current engagement initiatives. There is some wariness for example about the potential for the derailing of an inclusive approach to parent participation:

When it comes to parent voice -- well there’s the ones who always want to talk and get their way and that privileges one group. Here there are groups who can’t speak or won’t speak and the ones who can, and will be the ones to be heard. So we are careful about trying to ensure that we can hear all voices. (Principal)

There is an emphasis, therefore, on ensuring that every effort is made to ‘hear’ parent messages and to be seen to be responsive. The role and very title of the ‘listening assembly’ has accordingly been important. The school has implemented a few surveys to enhance the effectiveness of the listening assembly. The feedback is used to inform future planning.

For example, we wouldn’t have had Sing and Grow this year if the parents hadn’t said they had liked it... Parents wanted it so we thought it worth investing in. Similarly with the restorative justice course, parents loved that and asked for more. They wanted that support in parenting skills. (Principal)

Conclusion

Catholic Primary’s Low SES SSNP initiatives to develop parent partnerships build on existing and well-established relationships between the school and its families and focus on drawing parents more directly into involvement in the teaching and learning activities of the school and in providing support for their children’s learning at school and at home. Teachers across the school play an active role in this strategy and the PEC is able to draw on their specific skills in activities such as the running of parent workshops and development of newsletters.

In doing so the school is developing confidence and capacity within its parent population to play a more active role in their own children’s learning activities through a stronger understanding of current curriculum, pedagogy and policy contexts.

6. Case study: Independent College

Independent College is a co-educational K-12 school operating on two campuses in South Western Sydney, one a k-6 campus offering primary schooling and the other larger k-12 campus offering both primary and secondary education. Overall the college caters for about 900 primary and secondary students. This case study deals primarily with the k-12 campus where interviews were undertaken with school leaders, teachers and parents; ACARA school data however is drawn from both sites.

Through the Low SES SSNP external partnerships initiatives the school aims to provide LBOTE families with tools to link school and home learning. The school is providing instructions to parents and communicating their expectations of parents' role in the education of their children. Parents and members of the local community are encouraged to support the school through participation in school programs and events, and are provided with demonstration lessons for using specific resources in the home with their children.

The school encourages parents to be involved in the preparation of their children for kindergarten. They are encouraged to participate in the Parent and Community Committee, providing input and feedback to the school. To assist parents to take on a stronger role in their children's learning the school provides them with opportunities to learn about the school system and strategies for supporting their children to improve their performance. The school organises regular workshop sessions for this purpose. For instance, the school organises NAPLAN workshops to help parents understand student performance. Parents are also invited to participate in NAPLAN tutoring programs and encouraged to observe the school notices board and other communication information from the school.

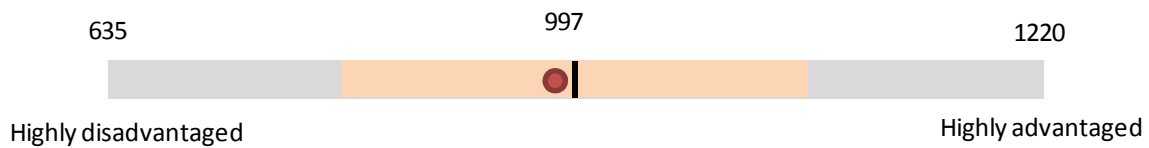
An outcome of the parent engagement strategy is the change in parent expectations and their connection with school learning. The school is addressing challenges associated with the implementation of the parent engagement strategy. It is developing further strategies for involving busy parents and parents with limited English. Similarly, the school is also exploring ways of involving parents at different stages of schooling. The pace of implementation of the strategy is also being monitored to consolidate effort.

School profile

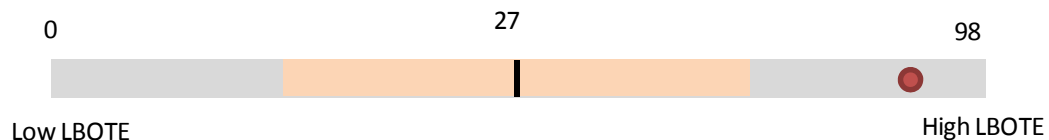
Student characteristics

In 2010 the school's ICSEA value of 988 placed Independent College close to the overall state mean of 997. A high proportion of students are from LBOTE families (88 per cent in 2010). Arabic is the dominant second language within the school community; however certain other language backgrounds – including Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, Bosnia, and elsewhere – are also identified as prevalent. There are no Indigenous students currently enrolled at the school.

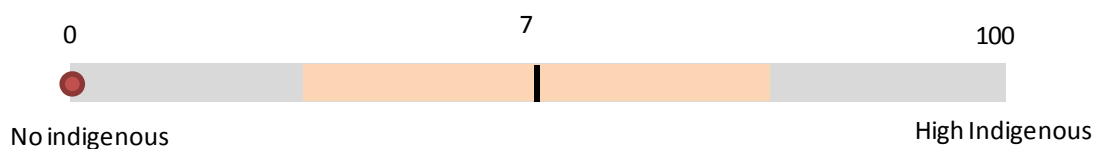
ICSEA=988



LBOTE=88%



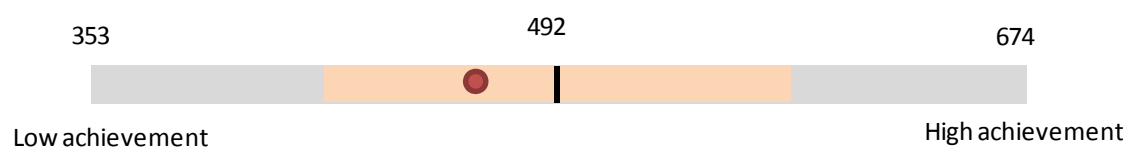
Indigenous=0%



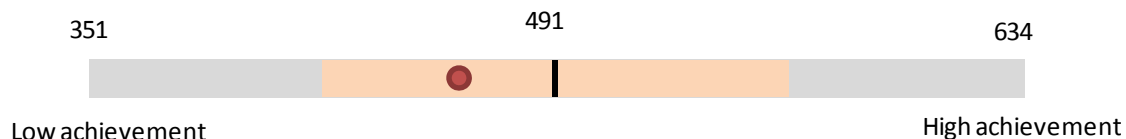
Student performance

Independent College's reading scores at primary and secondary levels fall short of all school means, reflecting literacy challenges faced by ESL students. In numeracy assessments results are stronger, especially at the Year 9 level where school results are level with the overall mean. In 2010, the mean score for Year 5 NAPLAN numeracy was 473, compared to state average of 492. In 2010, the mean score for Year 5 NAPLAN reading was 461 compared to state average of 491. In 2010, the mean score for Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy was 586. In 2010, the mean score for Year 9 NAPLAN reading was 546, which is under that state mean of 571. The school's attendance rate in 2010 was 95 per cent.

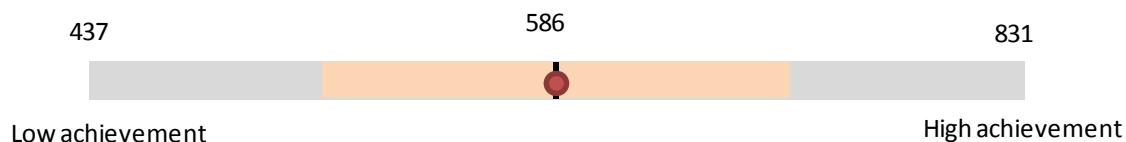
Year 5 NAPLAN numeracy=473



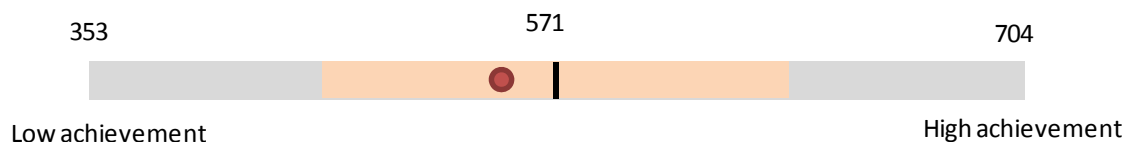
Year 5 NAPLAN reading=461



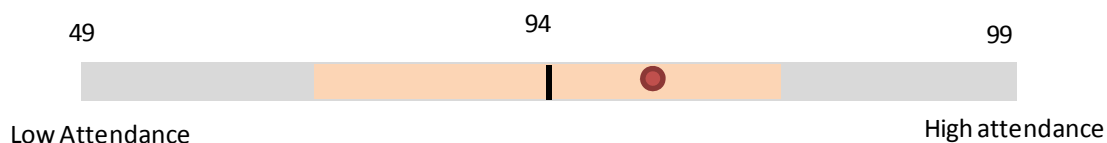
Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy=586



Year 9 NAPLAN reading=546



School attendance=95%



Leadership and staffing

Principal tenure

The current principal has led the school since its establishment in 1998. At the K-12 campus leadership is undertaken by the deputy principal.

Staffing

The current staffing complement is a full-time equivalent teaching staff of 74 and a full-time equivalent non-teaching staff of 17.2. This varies only marginally on staffing figures for 2010, when a further 0.5 FTE position was included in the non-staffing complement. Teaching numbers have grown since 2009, however, when the number of teachers was reported to be 58.

In 2010, 56 per cent of the primary school staff were New Scheme Teachers¹⁶, up from earlier years. In the secondary school, 27 per cent were New Scheme teachers. Retention of staff, for both primary and secondary levels, was around 83 per cent for 2010.

School income

Recurrent income

The school's annual recurrent income, based on 2010 figures, is \$9,276,025 with a per student net recurrent income of \$10,341.

Capital expenditure

The capital expenditure was \$401,075 for 2010.

Low SES SSNP

The school entered the Low SES SSNP in 2010. Its plan for 2011 itemises spending on SSNP initiatives of \$750,000.

Low SES SSNP external partnerships initiatives

Parent partnerships feature as one of six priority areas identified by the school in its Low SES SSNP planning. Others include:

1. Literacy – Reading and Writing
2. Numeracy – Numbers, Patterns and Algebra
3. Education and Technology
4. Teacher Quality
5. Student Engagement (School Plan 2011)

The Low SES SSNP provided the school with an opportunity to take stock of its progress on a range of key measures (Deputy Principal). In some areas its performances were strong. Student attendance was high and links with its parents and broader faith community were very good. However the school was comparatively new and had grown quickly; staff were sometimes inexperienced and student performances in key areas of literacy and numeracy were not comparing well to national or state means. High numbers of LBOTE families also played a constraining role in what might be possible for parent engagement in the life of the school, where so many public activities were “all spoken in English and that makes it hard for some parents” (Parent interview).

Inclusion of the school in the Low SES SSNP initiative provided an opportunity to explore some of these factors and plan for growth and improvement, including in the areas of parent and community partnerships and engagement. The school was able to be more strategic. SMART analysis broadened the staff's experiences and perspectives. They are better able to assess need and are more effective in targeting their teaching in order to achieve desired outcomes. The schools leadership team played a critical role in building teacher capacities.

If it doesn't start with the leaders it can't be conveyed to the teachers, so we have

¹⁶ Teachers who have never been employed to teach in NSW before October 1, 2004 (either on a permanent, casual or temporary basis) or who have not been employed as a teacher during the last five years are new scheme teachers under the Institute of Teachers Act 2004.

worked hard at building that leadership; it (Low SES SSNP) has been a great experience for us. (Deputy Principal)

This initial benchmarking was important in identifying needs and formulating strategies to be employed by the school. The Low SES SSNP enabled the school to aspire to realise their vision for partnerships with parents.

So we are moving toward a more evolved model, in between parent involvement and parent partnership depending on the focus. We are now looking at where and how we are involving parents in the curriculum, and also building up information skills and parent feedback. (Deputy Principal)

The school is implementing parent surveys to include the 'parent voice' and determining the interests and needs of parents. Parent feedback also informs the development of the school plan. In response to the school's initial analysis and identification of need its overall Low SES SSNP Plan emphasises:

- employ a learning support leader (1.0 FTE)
- employ a learning support teacher (6.0 FTE) to implement team based teaching approaches
- employ a consultant to train staff in using ICT in teaching and learning
- release teachers to provide student feedback and analyse student data
- employ tutors to staff the after school tutoring club

A number of other external partnerships supplement the school's relationships with parents through engagement with the community more broadly. Chief among these are faith-based partnerships linking to Muslim bodies such as the Islamic High Council of Australia, Muslim sport clubs and youth groups and Radio Station MNFM, a multicultural Muslim community radio station that promotes the school's achievement and standing. Partnerships with other faith based schools and organisations such as Scouts are also reported.

In 2010 intended outcomes for parent partnerships in 2011 were defined as:

- an increased participation of LBOTE families in the school curriculum
- enhanced community relationships.

This set of outcomes was refined by the following year; the plan for 2012 evolved to:

- an improvement in providing LBOTE families with the tools to link home and school; and
- enhanced parental engagement in student learning.

These amendments are instructive in pointing to a sharper focus and growing confidence in the school over time in identifying and communicating its instructional directions and expectations of its relationship with families, aligning that partnership more closely to student learning.

There are a variety of partnership strategies that the school has employed to specifically link Low SES SSNP-related activities to enhancing parent and community engagement. Key SSNP measures in the school that link to this focus include:

- increasing parents' involvement in preparing children for kindergarten
- encouragement of parents' engagement on school Parent and Community Committee (PCC)
- provision of parent workshops and forums on themes such as NAPLAN
- NAPLAN tutoring classes
- provision of LCD (liquid crystal display) to inform parent community of school events
- training parents to support key literacy strategies – e.g.
- parents as volunteers – generating opportunities for engagement
- student tutoring program
- supporting parents to help students learn at home.

Supporting parents to prepare children for kindergarten

One initiative associated with the SSNP has been the additional support extended to parents in preparing their children for kindergarten. This is regarded as especially important for families new to the school, and particularly for those who are engaging with school environments in Australia for the first time. This induction stage allows parents and school to build a connection before school actually commences. It allows teaching staff to meet new families and incoming children in a more relaxed way and provides important preparation for small children making the transition to school environments. Importantly parents and children receive targeted attention at this point:

With kindy orientation they have three sessions where the parent can come in, and when the child does the orientation in the classroom the parents all go to the hall and have different sessions, such as workshops on maths and English, where teachers show you how to teach your child. Which I thought was pretty good for new parents in the school. (Parent)

Under this strategy school readiness assessments are initially undertaken with all kindergarten children, after which several orientation sessions are run (concurrently with parents' sessions) over a four-week period before the commencement of the school year. Resources required for this initiative include assessment resources, handouts for parents (including a learning preparation pack), catering for the parents' sessions, and release for five kindergarten teachers over four days to conduct workshops and orientations.

These induction sessions are part of a more overarching strategy to build parents' involvement in their children's school education from the outset. They also reflect a more general focus in the school on building children's learning competencies from the very outset. The school now allocates some of its most experienced teachers to early years classes up to Grade 3:

In the lower classes we focus on selecting the best teachers we have and giving them the classes so the students get the best possible preparation; we started this last year and we have already seen the benefit. Year 3 last year produced absolutely excellent results in NAPLAN. We hope to continue on this improvement (Deputy Principal)

Encouraging parents to participate in the PCC

The PCC constitutes an important element of the school's refocusing of parent engagement.

While the Committee had existed prior to the school's participation in the Low SES SSNP it has seen a revamp in the past two years and will shortly be conducting its first elections for all positions including executive roles. The deputy principal has made the PCC a specific focus and plays a strong role in its conduct and activity.

We ...wanted more parent involvement so we tried to amend it to suit what parents told us they want in a PCC. This is more tailored to their needs. I... told the coordinators I wanted them to attend also and give me feedback afterwards... I made myself available to parents as we were going about this change. I made it clear I wanted to know from parents what their needs were, their concerns etc. I was taking a very active role. And the coordinators did too. (Deputy principal)

Because the school offers a number of opportunities for parent voice to be heard the PCC is now constructed along more businesslike lines. Part of the deputy principal's commitment to parents enlisted to play a role in the current PCC was that their time was recognised as precious and would not be wasted:

Talk for the sake of it isn't the primary focus of the PCC. We always have an action sheet so it is clear what gets instrumented as a result of discussions. ..There was an ongoing issue with teacher parking and school drop off and that has been addressed. It acknowledges the concerns and the parents have been very happy with this.

The PCC is not the sole opportunity for parent engagement but it is intended to provide a direction for other forums. Up to ten parents participated in an initial brainstorming session, providing ideas about ways to involve parents in the school. Building on the success of this meeting, a follow up meeting was held to involve all parents in the brainstorming exercise. The deputy principal approached a number of parents to participate in the Committee as a strategic core group who could be relied on to enlist other parents in specific activities, including attendance at a parent evening (an 'open forum') once a term to discuss school policies and programs.

We wanted to make the school stronger – we saw these parents as ambassadors for the school both within and outside the school community... I have said to parents, "I don't want to take much of your time but I really want you to be more involved." So I said to them "Can you give me, what, an evening a term? Will you do that for us?" and they said "Yeah, we can. We can do once a term." (Deputy principal)

Parent committee members recognise their role as intermediaries and are committed to involving other parents informally in ongoing discussions. Parents take their ambassador role seriously:

I was talking to a parent yesterday—she is Kurdish. She was saying she used to feel intimidated talking to the teachers but now she feels so much better talking to the teacher because they understand some of her difficulties in not speaking Arabic. We (PCC) have a relationship with some of the Kurdish parents –they come to me to ask questions – it has been like that for years. (Parent)

The PCC has now taken on a stronger role in the school. Again this may be a necessary phase in a school's rapid growth. One parent saw the changes in these structures as a response to a need for more formalisation of processes and structures to allow parents and staff to manage their communication well. He saw parent involvement in more defined and representative structures as an important part of the organisational health of a growing

college.

I think the school now realises that the bigger it gets the more it needs the parents. I had a daughter here many years ago. HSC hadn't even started here and there wasn't a PCC then, or an SRC, and there weren't many inductions, or many parent helpers... The smaller it was the more closed off it was. I think the school has realised the bigger the numbers the more help they need from the parents. (Parent)

Provision of parent workshops and forums

In developing a more explicit approach to supporting parents in assisting with their children's learning the college now conducts school and community workshops to give parents information and skills in family reading, writing and numeracy, together with parenting focused events. These workshops expose parents to teaching strategies and ideas. Recent workshop themes have included Reading to Learn, and the Learning in Early Numeracy programs. While some of these workshop themes are planned and generated by the school, others are developed as specific responses to parents' request.

The Low SES SSNP enables the school to deliver workshops to parents and in so doing provided a structure for communication between the school and families. According to the deputy principal, staff feel more comfortable about asking parents to "come on board". For example, parents were informed about the Positive Behavioural Intervention and Support (PBIS) initiative which reflects a whole school approach to behaviour management. This initiative emphasises restorative rather than punitive approaches to student behaviour management.

We felt we needed to discuss with parents the school's expectations of behaviour. Not all parents are adopting the PBIS approach but many are reporting to us that things are better at home now they are aligning home and school approaches. It means the student experience consistency with what happens in the classroom. (Deputy Principal)

Participation in NAPLAN tutoring classes

NAPLAN tutoring classes have also been instituted for students on Saturdays in weeks leading up to the NAPLAN testing period. This has provided an opportunity for the school to communicate to parents the principles behind the assessment and the school's approach to student preparation. The school felt the need for some better alignment of parents' and school's approaches to NAPLAN:

At the beginning we didn't have a proper plan to explain to the parents about the importance of NAPLAN. They would hear about it, know it's a test and all they would say is "Son, please work harder; I want you to do well"... (Deputy Principal)

Accordingly, the school built a requirement into the highly-subscribed NAPLAN tuition program, attended by almost all Year 5, 7 and 9 students on Saturday mornings. Student registration would be required for the tuition and parents would need to come in to make that formal registration. Attendance at the parent information session would be linked to the registration. "As an attendance strategy this was successful and "got the room full" (Deputy Principal):

Parent 1: Last year's one was an amazing turn-up – there were 85-90 per cent of

parents last year.

Parent 2: There was a roll call! I think there was a bit of pressure on the parents to be there. You had to sign in...But it's good pressure because of its importance...

The session was reported by parents to be helpful in understanding not only the context of the assessment but the skills and dispositions actually tested and the strategies students were encouraged to use to improve literacy and numeracy proficiency:

We had a session for parents that was really informative, giving us strategies that teachers use with students in the classroom to help them break down questions; and I also saw that carried through into my daughter's homework. When my daughter sat down to do her work she was underlining work and circling words and I could understand what she was doing: I could follow her thoughts. (Parent)

The Saturday NAPLAN classes – we got very involved – we had to write a persuasive text ourselves – it was very interesting to see how parents thought. And we went through what a persuasive text should be composed of – the languages and techniques and the modality words, all the different words we were exposed to and the marking criteria; all of those examples... (Parent)

Yeah and you felt it was so much easier to help your child at home knowing that yourself. The kids have to write a persuasive piece every week – so now we get what they are doing. I think parents actually got NAPLAN after that; they understood what it was about for their children. (Parent)

Parents referred to these Saturday classes and the information session at some length in interview; they saw the classes as symbolic of the shared focus of the school community, aligning teachers, students and parents in a single exercise:

I would say that honesty and faith are important – not only are parents coming here on Saturday but so are the teachers, coming to help the kids and help the school

It makes you want to come, because the teachers are putting in the effort, their dedication. They're not doing it for the dollars; they're doing it to make the community better.

In 2011 Year 5 and Year 9 reading results compared closely to the mean of all NSW schools. In the area of numeracy Years 5 and 9 performed well above NSW means.

Informing parents of school events

A recent initiative to inform students, parents and other community members of school calendars and activities has been the installation of LCD monitors to enhance within-school communication. It is intended that the monitor will support parents' awareness of school issues and build an impression of "common goals and expectations (Coordinator)."

Training parents in literacy strategies

One avenue for parent involvement that is afforded high visibility in the school at present is the role of parent helpers in supporting the school's MULTiLit program. MULTiLit is a remedial reading program, aimed at children aged seven and over who are falling behind their

peers in literacy. It is intensive and requires high levels of active assistance and support. Parents often support teachers in delivering this program, but training is required. The program commenced in 2010 and was initiated under the Low SES SSNP. The staff ensured that there was an appropriate teacher, parent and student ratio (i.e. two teachers per child and one parent). Parents on both campuses of the college were invited to listen to children read. Prior to commencement they participated in workshop sessions and assisted to develop essential skills.

The school organises afternoon teas for parents at the end of each term to show appreciation and encourage their ongoing involvement. For parents, participation is recognised as an area where parents' contributions are well recognised and acknowledged. For some parents, too, the program has been a pathway into even closer involvement with the school with some becoming actual members of staff.

They went from parent volunteers to parents employed as teacher aides. They have done their aide training at TAFE and it has been a pathway for them. Other parents see that – it's a great incentive for them to be involved. (NP coordinator)

Encouraging parents to volunteers

The example of is one example of parent volunteering and working closely with student learning. Again the school is making more concerted efforts to build the rate of parent engagement in this activity, to link parents' volunteer activities more closely to their own skills and interests and to develop more systematic processes to recruit parent volunteers. Development of a volunteer register, for example, provides a better-coordinated approach to parent engagement within the school and also promotes a context where the parent is more likely to offer to be involved:

What we have also done recently-- I give them a form and ask what they would like to help us with. Options can be, for example, help with excursions, , or Arabic tutoring, because we need some parent helpers, having more students who come from a non Arabic background and need that help, or even those even the kids with the language, not speaking it at home. (Deputy Principal)

Such registers or databases are important in generating conversations and are not confined to volunteering. Classroom teachers use similar registers to build their own understanding of children's learning needs. The strategy can promote communication between parents and teachers around children's learning needs and parents' own perceptions about their child's learning:

At the start of the year my daughter came home with a form about asking for her strengths and weaknesses, what she needs help with and so on – I thought that was really good., I thought the teacher would be too busy to read it but at one stage I was talking to the teacher and she referred to it and I thought wow! How impressive how she was able to recall that! (Parent)

Participation in student tutoring

An important and much targeted strategy in addressing literacy and numeracy needs across the school has been the provision of after-hours tutoring to selected students assessed to need specific learning support. These after-hours tutoring sessions are provided twice a week over the course of a term and are directed to specifically identified aspects of a students' learning.

Sixty students are selected to receive a term's tuition and a total of 240 students benefit from this program every year. The costs are underwritten by the Low SES SSNP. Funding is used to cover teaching costs as well as the cost of employing a tutoring provider to organise the program, including the pre assessment and post assessments.

This tutoring program is another initiative encouraging parental engagement, as it requires close communication with parents regarding student needs. Parents are further encouraged to engage with the school as they regard the program demonstrating the school's commitment to their children's learning:

The moment we started tutoring club we had a huge amount of phone calls thanking us for considering their child, and those we didn't select we had phone calls from, asking could they be on the list. We explained that we had to prioritise and it would be the weakest one first. But it is such positive feedback – parents are always asking for it. (Deputy Principal)

Supporting parents to help students at home

Workshops are one strategy to help parents in supporting their children in homework and in home based learning. Parents mentioned the value of these sessions in building their own confidence and knowledge; among other things workshops built their vocabularies of learning and directed them to websites and other sources that could assist them in supporting their children's education at home:

It makes us more aware and allows us to follow what is going on in the classroom so we are able to assist at home and not confuse the child. Because when you use the same strategy the child will benefit. We learnt in the Saturday (NAPLAN) session instructions on how to answer a multiple choice question, like eliminate the answers that are way off, read what is left, go back to the text. I see my daughter doing all that: she crosses off the answers she thinks are way off, and then she focuses... (Parent)

The school engaged parents in the mathematics program by providing them with a DVD containing a variety of maths games designed to teach problem solving strategies and numerical concepts. These DVDs are presented to parents at workshop sessions and parents encouraged to play these games at home with their children, especially in the holiday periods. They are encouraged to involve other family members in the maths games.

They are building that relationship with the child so the child is not alone in the activity. So as the child grows older or there are different ages in the family there is this pack that can work well as a resource. Older siblings can use it with younger ones. It's like a little gift for the family. There are lots of visuals to support the pack so that even the family members who can't speak English can be supported. It's very inclusive. (NP coordinator)

\$6000 has been allocated from the Low SES SSNP funding to provide for these numeracy holiday packages for families of primary-aged children.

Communication with parents and the community

While acknowledging the effectiveness of strategies identified above in engaging parents and building a stronger understanding in the school community of current educational contexts

and the school's own plans for improved school outcomes the school has identified areas where specific "fit for purpose" approaches are required. On the secondary campus of the school, which draws on a broader and more diverse population, parents' commitment cannot be taken for granted. As the school has grown and attracted a broader cross section of the faith community the lives of families are no longer necessarily wholly interlinked with the school and its immediate community. In these contexts the school needs to work more actively to engage and enlist parents, and actively build a sense of common cause. Strategies such as direct emailing and phoning make connections more direct:

(The Deputy Principal) now sends emails, and we call the parents, so it's that extra push, not just a letter in the school bag and that seems to be working, like, you can't get away from us! And there are reminders, and posters around the school, and the newsletter to back that up (NP Coordinator)

This approach is both pervasive and positive, extending from school leadership through to teachers and administrative staff. The Assistant Principal outlines how messages are delivered in a context of more purposeful and consistent communication between classroom teachers and parents and between school administration and parents. Teachers are encouraged to ensure that their contacts are not confined to negative themes:

Phone calls, letters, emails, sometimes just saying hello, your child is great! I have said to the teacher "let's focus on positives, give them a call and say you are noticing improvement": That sort of thing. Feedback from the last PCC tells me it has improved relationships beyond what we would have expected. Parents are using the website more also. And they are noticing differences.

The use of the website and of emails has also facilitated communications between the school and parents. Part of the SSNP strategy involved enhancement of communication about school events through a range of strategies – including the website, an LCD display at the school and targeted emails. The deputy principal referred to an extensive email communication list used to stay in contact with many parents on his campus. This strategy has been important as students do not always provide their parents with school notices, especially at the secondary level.

That's part of our external partnership and so we need to budget for these communications — the website, phone calls, emails... The email system is now used very strongly. Parents are asked for their email addresses and we make up bulk email lists. I try to ensure I have every parent's current email. So in one go I can be in touch with 150 parents. Parents respond really well to those email contacts. Whereas if we sent notices home with the kids the parent very often wouldn't be getting it. (Deputy Principal)

This strategy was mentioned by the National Partnerships coordinator as an effective strategy that had only recently been introduced. The SMS is also used and considered to be working well as most parents have mobile phones.

Parents regard these communication strategies as effective. In interviews parents expressed appreciation for the efforts made by the school to build contacts and to ensure parents were advised of school activities, particularly upcoming events. Some also demonstrated extensive familiarity with all aspects of the website including annual reports and school plans:

I really like the way they have the school plan on the website and how they are using the money – like some things you can't see at the surface and it makes you feel like

how it's a long process and it's a process that intertwines so many different factors happening in the school that you can't necessarily see.

Annual business dinners are held by the school and provide a bridge between the College and community and business leaders. These events have been used to showcase the school and to strengthen its community base. Increasingly parents and some ex-students are involved in these events and the occasion may be used to acknowledge the contribution of "front line" members of the parent community who receive recognition of their contribution.

Conclusion

The school reports a growing confidence in its partnerships with parents and attributes success to date to a gradualist approach, building groundwork for change. Openness and accessibility, responsiveness to parents' concerns, a strategy of more consistent and positive communication with families employing media such as the website, email and phone contacts have underpinned more targeted and high profile events or programs such as information forums and coaching programs. The strategy has been conducted at a pace that aligns with other National Partnerships initiatives and is able to build on those initiatives.

7. Case Study: Western High School

Western High School is a co-educational Year 7-10 government school in the Western Region of Sydney with around 630 enrolments. A concern of Western High school that parent engagement in the school was low (particularly so for certain groups) informed the strategic focus on parent and community partnerships as part of the Low SES SSNP.

The school allocated SSNP funds to develop and implement a parent and community engagement strategy. Two part time positions were created in 2009: a Parent Education coordinator; and a Community Education Officer. Parents are now able to seek assistance with specific concerns or questions from these staff. They are provided with timely information through the regular newsletters about the significant events and priorities of the school.

The school also organises parent and teacher meetings and forums related to areas of priority for both the school and parents. Activities for specific community groups are also organised. For example, the school seeks input from Aboriginal parents through surveys and focus group meetings. Opportunities are identified for teachers to facilitate home school partnerships, such as encouraging parents to attend assemblies and other celebratory community events, the commencement of Year 7 and student extra-curricular activities.

Teachers are supported to build their confidence and skills in working with parents, in particular with regard to student attendance.

The school is in the early stages of implementation of its parent and community engagement strategy. It is currently exploring measures for assessing the effectiveness and impact of its strategy. Suggested measures include monitoring the number of parents participating in specific activities, and identifying types of contacts between the school and the home (that are additional to conventional forms of communication, such as parent and teacher meetings). Measures are seen to be necessary for identifying incremental changes in the culture of the school.

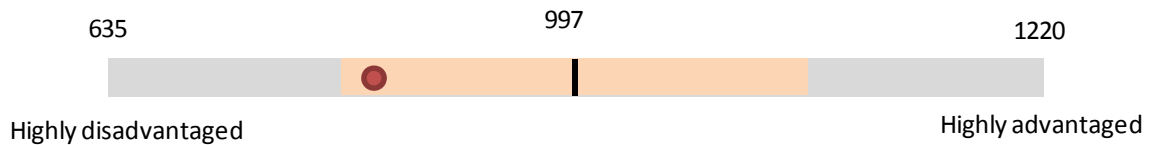
School profile

Student characteristics

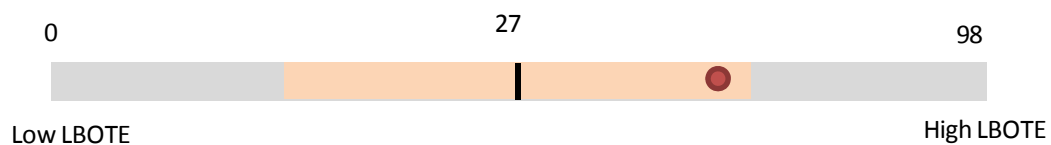
In 2010 the school's ICSEA value was 871, which is below state average¹⁷. LBOTE students made up 42 per cent of the school's population in 2010. 15 per cent of students were from an Indigenous background, which is above state mean (six per cent).

¹⁷ Teachers describe the local community to be under significant social and economic pressure: unemployment is currently even higher than it has been in the past and many families are experiencing significant stress.

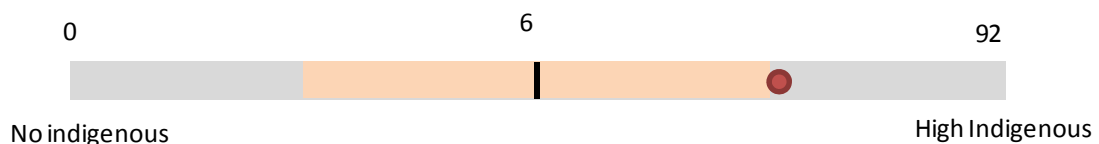
ICSEA=871



LBOTE=42%



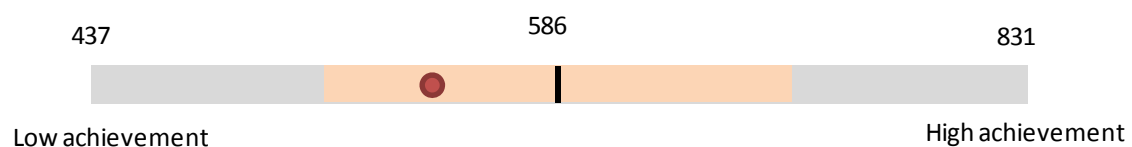
Indigenous=15%



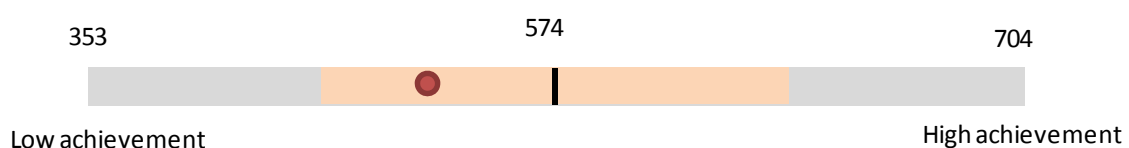
Student performance

The 2010 Year 9 NAPLAN results for reading and numeracy are below those of both state means and means for like schools. In terms of student performance, the school's Year 9 NAPLAN outcomes translate to a mean numeracy score of 522, below the state mean of 586. Similarly its Year 9 NAPLAN reading score of 507 fell well short of the state mean of 574. Student attendance at the school has trended up from 81 per cent in 2010 to 83 per cent in 2011. This is below state and national averages for attendance.

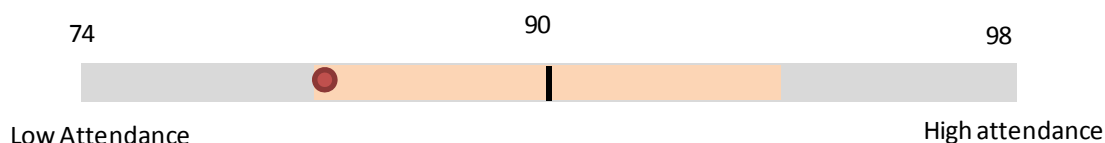
NAPLAN Year 9 numeracy=522



NAPLAN Year 9 reading=507



School attendance=81%



Leadership and staffing

Principal tenure

The current principal has led the school since 2000.

Staffing

The current staffing complement is a full-time equivalent teaching staff of 54.3 and a full-time equivalent non-teaching staff of 14.9.

Compared with other government schools in the Low SES SSNP Western High School has:

- higher-than-average turnover of teachers (18.5 per cent compared with 10.7 per cent)
- younger than average age profile of teachers
- a less experienced teacher workforce in terms of years of service—only 29.6 per cent have 10 or more years experience
- average of 5.1 days sick leave per teacher, which is below the average of 6.4 days for all government schools in the Low SES SSNP.

School income

Recurrent income

The school's annual recurrent income, based on 2010 figures, is \$8,518,957 with a per student net recurrent income of \$13,332.

Capital expenditure

The capital expenditure was \$946,257 for 2010

Low SES SSNP

The school entered the Low SES SSNP in 2009. It received \$682,036 in 2011 as part of the SSNP initiative. Projected funding in the school's current plan sets NP funding at \$789,758, PASP funding at \$233,922 and PSFP funding at \$23,335.

Low SES SSNP external partnership initiatives

Western High School's Low SES SSNP funding is being used to address a number of key concerns identified through the situational analysis undertaken in 2009. One concern was that students' engagement and learning outcomes were lower than state averages on a range of key measures such as NAPLAN scores, attendance data and student retention. Another

concern was that attrition among teachers was high, with a comparatively high turnover of staff. The proportion of comparatively inexperienced staff was also a concern: teachers required support to more effectively build their skills, and better meet students' complex needs. Parents' engagement with the school was low - particularly for certain groups within the school community.

The school's SSNP Plan therefore focused on lifting the literacy and numeracy achievement levels of students by implementing quality programs for staff development and support, and utilising quality systems and learning methods for students. The school also focussed on building and improving community and parent partnerships. A number of strategies were implemented under the Low SES SSNP to support this aim:

- the establishment of a 0.4 FTE Parent Engagement Coordinator (PEC) position
- encouraging parent attendance at assemblies and other celebratory community events
- linking to primary schools and their parent P&Cs
- establishment of parent forums on school direction or policy
- establishment of a Community Engagement Leader position
- targeted student engagement strategies
- whole school policies supporting home, school and community partnerships
- building external partnerships

Of these, the greatest resource allocations have been attached to the parent liaison work and the school's case management approach to attendance and other targeted engagement initiatives.

Establishment of community liaison positions

The school funds two community liaison positions. The Parent Engagement Coordinator position was created in 2009 and a former teacher of many years' standing in the school community was appointed on a 0.4 FTE fractional basis. She provides an opportunity for parents and caregivers to have a voice in the school "without feeling embarrassed or overwhelmed" (website). As such she is often the first point of contact for parents who lack a clear understanding of school structures or personnel, but wish to approach the school regarding specific needs.

She also plays a strong liaison role with feeder primary schools which involves: connecting with Parent and Citizen Association groups at those schools; developing a newsletter for those feeder schools with a focus on school news and on student activities; organising parent forums once a term; organising a separate Aboriginal parent forum to provide information about the school and encourage their participation in the school's planning processes; organising a parent teacher evening once a term; and managing the primary-secondary

transition program and orientation days.

This position also assumes responsibility for administration of some opinion and evaluation surveys focusing on parents' experiences and needs. This is used as feedback to assist with school planning.

The Parent Engagement Coordinator supports teachers in optimizing their opportunities to engage with their students' parents and with the broader community. She draws on the Family-School Partnerships Framework, for example, in identifying the range of opportunities teachers may be exploring during the school year to build parent engagement. In a circulated document for staff she notes the following opportunities for building parent and community connections and engagement:

- Year 7 commencement
- swimming and athletics carnivals
- Year 6 day – aligns with the swimming carnival where primary children and parents are invited to attend
- Year 5 day – aligns with the athletics carnival where primary students and parents are invited to attend
- Year 6 information evening
- formal school assemblies—parents are invited when their child/children are receiving award, presenting or performing
- Anzac Day ceremony
- Parent-teacher evenings
- orientation day
- parent forums
- presentation evenings
- assemblies and forums.

The Community Engagement Leader is a head teacher who receives teaching release time to undertake this community role. She oversees the fortnightly school newsletter and its distribution, also working with older students on the school's volunteering program and linking with primary schools to support transition. The Community Engagement Leader believes that feeder schools have increased their level of understanding about the operation of the school and 'speak highly of the school'. The school is encouraging teachers working in feeder schools and parents of primary school students to participate in its community events.

Encouraging parent attendance at assemblies and events

Current engagement strategies focus on building parent's access to the school and boosting their participation in school-based activities. This is a first step on the engagement spectrum. To boost attendance, especially from parents who may not have been involved with the school before, a range of strategies are being trialed to attract such families into closer relationships with the school. Earlier in 2011, for example, the conventional parent-teacher afternoon (which tended to be very poorly attended) was replaced by a more lavish evening event:

...We had a wonderful community evening last term and there were hundreds of parents. We had the Pacific Islander kids performing. ..The idea was that it had to be positive, and the whole evening had to be positive. If the parents asked how the

child was going, if they were going well, fine – if not, we also had interview sheets to set up some follow up interviews. We did have a small number of follow up contacts from that...It's been the same in the past for cultural events. When the children are performing the parents are keen to come in but when the performances are over – whoosh – they've gone – so you need to bookend the activities to grab them at the time. (Parent Engagement Coordinator)

Events such as this are regarded as platform events on which to leverage further engagement. On this occasion many staff made strong efforts to make contact with parents and to set up inviting activities to support the evening. Catering was provided and teachers set up engaging activities to showcase particular KLAs. Parents were specifically contacted by teachers, who phoned to extend invitations:

Like the community evening, we should build on that now. It was a strong initiative but it was a lever: it has to be built on. Every faculty was doing something, providing something in an activity that people could do and take away with them. And we ensured that everyone was represented. And we called parents as well. We were hours on the phone, calling and calling and calling parents and asked them to tell other people. And very few said they couldn't come; most people said they could, even just to get us off the phone! (Parent Engagement Coordinator)

As this coordinator recognises, events such as these are “successful in bringing parents in” and provide opportunities for “parents meeting teachers they had not met before”. The challenge for the school is to follow up and build on the success of such events (to connect more closely with parents and maintain contact once established).

This community evening is not the only example of the school's efforts to attract families who have previously been less involved within the school community, although it may well be the most successful in terms of attendance figures. Other examples focused on a social and low key approach. Although morning teas and suppers offered opportunities for social interaction, forums are considered to be more effective and they will ultimately replace the Parent and Citizen Association structure. Forums enable staff and parents to focus on specific areas, such as, understanding multiple intelligences or discussing the school's volunteering program.

Linking to primary schools and their Parents and Citizens Associations

The rationales for connection to local primary schools and their Parents and Citizens Associations are multiple. On one level it is important for the school to maintain strong connections with these schools to assure a continuing stream of students making the transition to the high school – all the more important in the context of strong competition for these students within the local cluster overall. . But the school has also developed a view that primary school parents will be receptive to continuing their school involvement if offered encouragement at the secondary school level. Given conventionally higher levels of parent engagement with primary schools, the school focuses on actively targeting transition parents to leverage continuing parent involvement at the secondary level.

It's important for us to make a big effort with primary and with Year 7 parents -- if they were an involved primary parent they want to keep on being one. So the more successful forums we have had were with the Year 7 parents when we had about 15 parents. You get excited at that number, which some schools would see as very unsuccessful...

In certain activities – such as having secondary school students visit primary schools to give music or dance performances, inviting Grade 5 and 6 students to the high school for “fun” days such as swimming and athletics carnivals, or developing a coherent suite of transition events to support Grade 6 students in making the steps from primary to secondary school – the school builds links back into the primary schools to establish trust and promote parent disposition toward involvement and engagement.

The school is focussing in working with students who have elected to attend the school. The Transition coordinator visits feeder primary schools and at times delivers mini lessons to prospective students. This strategy is designed to reward students who have confirmed their enrolment in the school.

Establishment of parent forums

One theme generated within teacher interviews was the decision to disband the school’s Parents and Citizen Association in favor of a series of ‘parent forums’ to be offered once a term. The Parents and Citizen Association meetings were undersubscribed and regarded as without clear focus or direction. It has been noted that these alternative forums have not yet attracted a strong group of parents – around half a dozen parents may attend:

When we try to hold a parent forum or a discussion group, parents can’t be motivated to get involved...

Parent forums – these are information sessions about various things and to complete surveys. We don’t get many parents and it’s the same ones anyway. A handful if we’re lucky. They’re notified by phone or letter

We don’t have a Parents and Citizen Association because of never consistently having enough numbers to make a quorum, so the parent forums were a tool to replace that in some ways: having a specific agenda, a teaching and learning agenda that raised the community issues and what we wanted the discussion to be about. We sent home notes with every student and received a very small number back. I don’t know if parents don’t care or don’t know that they can have an opinion or that they can be involved in school decision making... or that they feel it is just not their place...

Though forums have continued to be held and have addressed a number of themes including parenting, attendance figures have remained low. Parents speak for example of “the normal ones”, the handful of people they may normally see at such events; one forum attracted over a dozen parents, which was deemed, to be more than the usual crowd. Several parents were new to the school and were following on from engaged relationships with their primary school. These parents were still learning the ropes and were participating in a review of school policy:

At that meeting there were parents there who didn’t know there was a school website, or newsletters. “How do we do this?” they would ask. “How do we do that?” The forum was to ask about particular programs and they didn’t know anything about them. So there was discussion about the sports program and changing the criteria of the whole school and there was that bit of discussion and that was it. It was supposed to be the start of a number of consultations. So there were questions that these parents answered (but didn’t know much about) and we were split on views and so the school said, “Well we should meet again.” But after that we got a note saying what they had decided. If you have problems with that ring the

school. But there should have been a proper survey of all the parents, not just the views of 10 people who didn't agree with each other anyway... (Parents)

Targeted student engagement strategies

The school has implemented a whole school approach to building student engagement, which is closely connected to building more positive relationships between the school and parents (particularly parents of less engaged students).

To address student attendance at the school and classroom level, attendance coordinators and year advisors have been allocated time to develop consistent and accurate attendance monitoring and follow up processes. A 'success coordinator' has been employed to coordinate recognition of positive learning behaviours and this recognition has been integrated into school assemblies, events and publications. Specific programs have been developed for Year 10 learners considered 'at risk' of full disengagement with a focus on work based learning. These initiatives are overseen by members of the executive or leading teachers.

Through the Low SES SSNP, the school established attendance coordination positions to address truancy issues. These coordinators are able to maintain ongoing communication with parents. They are expected to telephone parents whose children are absent for three consecutive days. The Student Welfare Coordinator indicates that parents appreciate this service. The school has been able to more effectively align attendance management with its case management strategy implemented by the year advisers. Staff monitor the student database, identify needs and devise strategies for intervention, including partnerships with community services and agencies.

These strategies have effected reductions in truancy and absences – truancy for example was reduced by 28 per cent over the space of a year and rates of absences overall have reduced. In addition, the incidence of in-school absences from class have also fallen, making for a more productive learning environment within the school:

Student attendance has definitely increased. There have been increases in awards handed out. I do think there is a more positive ambience around the place, less kids out of class, less just hanging around the school not in class, just running through the blocks. That was disruptive to teachers. They would bang on doors; bring other kids out with them: that was always worrying for teachers. The attendance coordinators would be able now to get them back into class.

An example of a targeted program that builds student engagement and relationships with parents through specifically addressing student learning needs is seen in the supported work studies program for Year 10 students at significant risk of disengagement. Low SES SSNP funding supports time release for the coordinator of this program (0.2 FTE), which is used chiefly to "make the phone calls, visit workplaces, talk to parents, talk to businesses..." A key feature of the program has been connection with parents to discuss pathways and placements:

With the work studies, of course, I am in close contact with the families, letting them know there are interviews set up and if they need clothes they can borrow them etc... So far it's been working really well. A lot of the parents know their kids are struggling and they are just glad their needs are being met rather than them truanting or walking about the school. (Learning needs coordinator)

SSNP funding also underwrites some of the students' incidentals needed for the work placement element of the program – such as folders for resumes and appropriate clothing to go to interviews.

As the program is in its first year it is yet to be evaluated. However, one feature already evident is that more positive interaction with parents and also increased engagement on the part of students. These students are among those most often identified as disruptive within the school, with many discipline referrals and unauthorised absences from class. Nearly halfway through the year the coordinator notes some change in these areas. The referral of student with negative behaviour reduced from 299 cases in 2011 to 79 in 2012. The level of student attendance in classes and in work experience had also increased over the last year. The decline in the number of referral cases and the increase in student attendance rate are attributed to the success of the program. Students are responding to the school's efforts to cater for them and meet their needs. The program is an example of 'embedded' parent engagement in building closer connections with parents around students' need for support and plans for pathways and transitions.

Whole school policies supporting home and school interaction

While the school has generated explicit strategies aimed at attracting parents and families into a more direct relationship with the school, other less direct strategies provide contexts for a cultural shift in school-parent relations. The school's focus on teacher development and student engagement in its current SSNP strategy involves stronger connections to parents in securing feedback and in constructing a shared responsibility for students' attendance, behaviour and learning. Revised processes for reviews of staffing involve securing information from parents through surveys and other avenues to develop information to feed into Teacher Assessment Reviews (TARS)¹⁸ and Executive Assessment Reviews (EARS). The emphasis on attendance coordinators and on a coherent and targeted approach to lifting attendance and reducing truancy also means a closer and more consistent connection between the school and parents in contacts made regularly for all absences from school. While this strategy may be viewed as risky in partnership terms – interventions may be read as intrusive and compliance-focused – the student welfare coordinator regards the strategy as effective and as "appreciated" by parents. Her perspective was supported by parents in interview who referred approvingly to this policy as emblematic of a changed approach to student wellbeing:

My daughter at the present moment is going through the normal teenage whatever. This morning I have had five teachers come to me and saying "What can we do? What is going on with her?" A year ago that wouldn't have happened: it would have been shrugged off... (Parent)

Parents also saw this more focused approach to student wellbeing and need extending to teaching and learning approaches:

I remember when my oldest was here (four years ago) – if kids had a problem with something they put their hand up to ask a question, but they could have their hand up until they died, just waiting, or the teacher would either ignore them or say "Well we've done that; we did it three weeks ago. I'm not interested." But now it's

¹⁸ TARS: a school based performance management process for teachers

different. Teachers will go over it with them now, it's much better... (Parent)

External partnerships

Other external partnerships involve:

- Local schools including feeder primary schools
- Universities (Fast Forward, LEAPS, targeted aspiration-building activities and programs with University of Sydney and University of Western Sydney)
- Local businesses and employers (including targeted engagement program for disengaged learners)

These strategies are those specifically identified as supporting the school's external partnerships initiatives with funding allocated to those initiatives. The strategies are supported however by more holistic and generalised approaches to partnering.

Partnerships challenges

For Western High School the objectives regarding parent engagement with the school must be viewed in the context of objectives for overall school culture change; they are interdependent. However it has been considered necessary to build teacher confidence and to put in place some underpinning routines – such as those supporting stronger attendance – before addressing parent partnerships more fully.

The school's student population is both high need and diverse, marshalling on one site a complex concentration of educational disadvantage and risk that may involve poverty, housing need, LBOTE status, low parental educational achievement, low literacy, parental unemployment, Indigenous status, disability and learning difficulties. Given this diversity and the intensity of need the opportunities for the school to engage with parents as a group overall may be limited by circumstances that may support more of a case management approach to families. The school's initiatives to engage with parents are sometimes geared to specific identifiable groups. There are specific activities or events staged for indigenous families, for example, as it is understood that these parents may not be likely to attend more open events; similarly teachers and parents comment on the likelihood that some parent groups may attend entertainment or performance-based events but may not be attracted to activities or meetings linked more closely to students' school outcomes and classroom experiences. The school therefore faces the challenge of working with discrete groups and honouring the needs and requirements of each without minimising others.

Low SES SSNP impact

If there was one thing we could fix that would be it, the parent engagement
(Community engagement coordinator)

The community and parent engagement strategies at Western High School are not yet fully developed and are acknowledged by staff to have taken a lower profile than other Low SES SSNP strategies more specifically targeted at student engagement and teacher development. The school has extended an invitation for a follow up on this review in coming years to track progress of the initiative over time, given the incremental nature of reform and impact and the

intensity of need documented within the college. Though programs for parent engagement have not been long in place and challenges for implementation have been shown to be great, the impact of the SSNP thus far may still be measured to some extent, acknowledging this impact is likely to increase over time.

One measure may be the numbers of parents actually involved in school-based activity. Some events, such as the community evening, have attracted strong attendance, and some teachers report increased attendance at assemblies and other events:

...We're definitely trying to get parental involvement and there is an increase because it was just so low before... (Student welfare coordinator)

Another measure may be the quality and incidence of contacts made with parents outside the contexts of conventional parent involvement (i.e., the parent-teacher evenings, school forums or other contexts that tend to define parental roles in school). Strategies that enlist parent support in building attendance rates or developing individual pathway plans for young people at risk involve parents in ways that connect closely with students' experiences of school; the impact of programs such as the Year 10 work studies program in engaging parents and thus improving attendance and retention rates is important. Similarly the initiative involving year level case managers contacting families as a matter of course has built connections between school and the home. Steps such as these provide a stronger platform for further engagement, and their role in shifting parent-teacher relationships to stronger and more positive foundations is evident in parent and teacher perceptions of incremental change –

Parents are more in contact with the school and more fully aware of the school (Student welfare coordinator)

I do think a more positive ambience around the place (Deputy Principal)

..Now they have teachers here who want to be here to help the kids. And you can see that change in the staff and in the attitudes of the teachers (Parent)

I think the school has now changed a bit of their position on where they're focussing – in the last six months or so (Parent)

These remarks highlight the incremental nature of change – shifts are positive overall but they do take time. One coordinator summarises their position at this stage very well:

It's having routines, in our classrooms and elsewhere, what we need is more routines. And delivering on what we promise. And sometimes exceeding ... Don't oversell but don't undersell... When we do things they're done properly; we get everything slowly into place.

Conclusion

The Low SES SSNP enabled the school to strategically focus on parent and community partnership. A parent and community engagement strategy was developed and two key positions were established: the Parent Education Co-ordination; and the Community Education Officer.

The parent and community engagement strategy enables parents to seek assistance with specific concerns or questions and to access information through the regular newsletters regarding significant events and priorities of the school. Parents are also

able to attend meetings and forums related to areas of priority for both the school and parents. The strategy enables the school to be responsive to the specific needs of parent and community groups. Aboriginal parents, for example, are also able to contribute through specific surveys and focus group meetings. The needs of teachers are also addressed through the strategy. They are supported to build their confidence and skills in working with parents, in particular with regard to student attendance.

The school is seeking to further develop and implement the parent and community engagement strategy. An important aspect of this development is the identification of appropriate performance measures.

8. Case study: South Coast High School

South Coast is a co-educational government secondary school in the Illawarra and South East Region with around 700 enrolments. Student numbers have remained fairly stable since the early 2000s.

The South Coast school community is diverse, but three types or groups of families are largely evident: (1) a large group of low-SES English-speaking families with low income, often single parent, (2) a relatively small group of families in which both parents are employed; and (3) a large Aboriginal community.

The school is using its Low SES SSNP funding linked to partnerships to employ a head teacher (welfare) to coordinate a whole of community welfare support service, and to employ a specialist school administrative support (SAS) staff member to provide administrative assistance for the SSNP.

Through the Low SES SSNP the school aims to provide its families with tools to better link school and home learning. The school has also focussed on the revitalisation of the P&C Committee which has assumed a higher profile in the school. To assist parents to take on a stronger role in their children's learning information sessions provide opportunities to learn about the school system and school strategies aimed at supporting children to improve their performance. Regular workshop sessions are scheduled for this purpose. Improved communication between the school and the home had led to an improvement in the student attendance rate (i.e. from low 80 to 89.3 percent).

Parents are also encouraged to volunteer at the school and are invited to nominate areas where they can be called on to assist – such as in reading support, language teaching support and assistance with excursions.

While strategies have been in place for a limited time there are some indications that the parent engagement strategy has led to change in parent expectations of the school and in their connection with their children's school learning. Challenges associated with the implementation of the parent engagement strategy include accommodation of the needs of Indigenous families.

The school faces a number of challenges in increasing the number of parents involved in the school, particularly hard to reach parents. There are challenges associated with communicating with Aboriginal families, in particular with regard to the role of the home in students' education. Collaborating with parents on student intervention options and programs can also at times present challenges for the school.

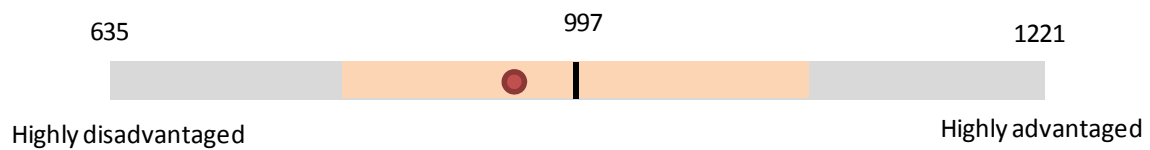
School Profile

Student characteristics

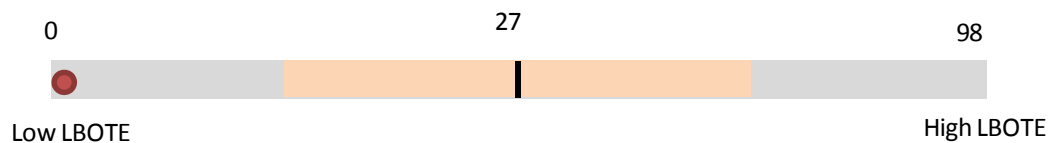
The school's ICSEA value in 2010 was 970, compared to a state average of 997 for secondary schools. In 2010, two per cent of students were from LBOTE backgrounds, below the state average of 27 per cent. Just on 10 per cent of students identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in 2010, compared to an average of six per cent for secondary schools

across the state.

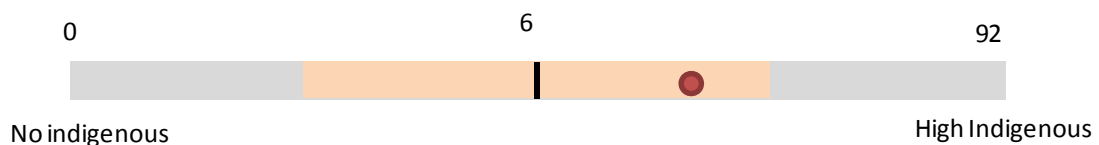
ICSEA=970



LBOTE=2%



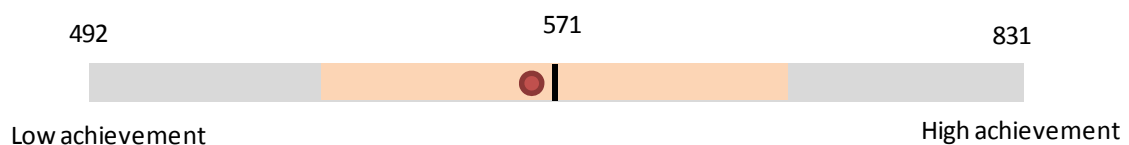
Indigenous=10%



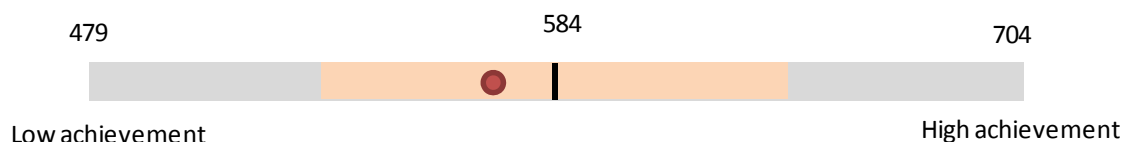
Student performance

The school's Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy score was 568 in 2010, which is slightly below the state mean (571). The school's Year 9 NAPLAN reading score was 570 in 2010, which was below the state mean (584). The school's overall attendance was 89.3 per cent in 2010. The school's completion rates were below the regional and state averages, with a completion rate of 72 per cent reported in 2010.

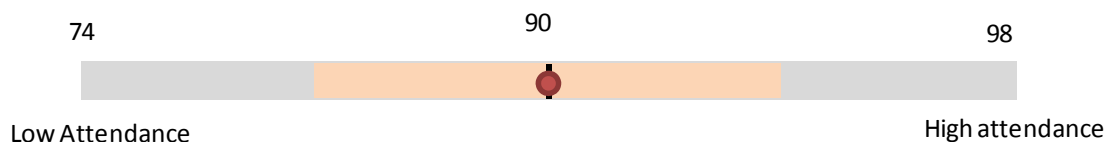
Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy=568



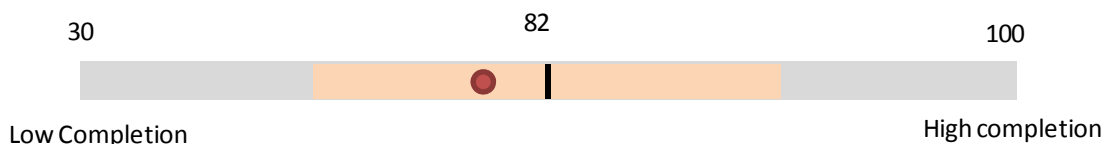
Year 9 NAPLAN reading=570



School attendance=89%



School completion=72%



Leadership and staffing

Principal tenure

At the time of interviews, the principal was a relieving principal, as the substantive principal was on sick leave.

Staffing

Compared with other government schools participating in the low SES SSNP the school has:

- lower-than-average turnover of teachers (6.7 per cent in 2010)
- a workforce that is much older than average—75.0 per cent of teachers are 50 years or older
- a substantially more experienced teacher workforce in terms of years of service, with 76.7 per cent having 10 or more years experience
- an average of 11.8 days of sick leave per teacher, which is substantially higher than the average of 6.4 days for all government schools in the Low SES SSNP.

There is a significant cohort of highly experienced staff who have been at the school for more than twenty years. Twenty-nine percent of teachers hold postgraduate qualifications.

School income

Recurrent income

The school's annual recurrent income is \$9,769,949 with a per student net recurrent income of \$13,807.

Capital expenditure

The capital expenditure is \$1,472,611.

Low SES SSNP

The school entered the Low SES SSNP in 2010 and the current funding allocation is \$735,137.

Other funding

The school receives Norte Norte program¹⁹ funding and is involved in the implementation of community based projects through the Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE)²⁰ program, funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

Low SES SSNP external partnerships initiative

South Coast's Low SES SSNP plan aims to lift the attendance, retention and performance of students through a whole of school and community approach. The South Coast school community is diverse. The school identified three main groups of families within the community: a relatively wealthy group of families; a larger group of low SES families with limited income and low employment; and a substantial group of Indigenous families.

The Low SES SSNP funding linked to partnerships is being used to:

- employ a head teacher (welfare) to coordinate a whole of community welfare support service
- employ a specialist SAS (1.0 FTE) to provide administrative assistance for the school's SSNP initiatives

There are a variety of partnership strategies the school is using to enhance parent and community engagement:

- engaging parents in the life of the school
- supporting the Parent and Citizen Association
- supporting families with students experiencing difficulties
- involving parents in the student school attendance
- engaging Aboriginal families
- engaging with external providers.

Although the school has not allocated specific funding for partnerships initiatives, roles of the head teachers funded through the Low SES SSNP²¹ include oversight of relevant elements of parent and community engagement. The school also benefits from PaCE program funding.

Engaging parents in the life of the school

¹⁹ Norte Norte funding provides tutorial assistance for senior Aboriginal students; independent learning hubs for Aboriginal students from K-12 and tutoring/mentoring/leadership programs for Aboriginal students in middle and senior years.

²⁰ PaCE: a community driven program for parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. It supports initiatives that assist families and communities to 'reach-in' to schools and other educational settings to engage in their children's education through participation in educational decision making, developing partnerships with education providers and supporting and reinforcing their children's learning at home, with the aim of improving the educational outcomes of their children.

²¹ (i.e. head teacher (welfare); head teacher (learning support); head teacher (careers, engagement, and VET coordination))

The school implements a number of strategies to support partnership building with parents.

Providing information

Regular newsletters provide information on school activities and events. The school provides parents with opportunities to interact with staff at parent and teacher meetings and at school community events related to fundraising, sport, cultural, creative and performing arts.

Holding parent meetings

Parent meetings, briefings, seminars or workshops are held for a variety of purposes. At the beginning of the school year, the end of the school year and at transition times, the school provides opportunities for parents to become involved in decision making. Advice is provided on subject selection and study patterns.

Parents are also provided with opportunities to discuss and give input on issues impacting on the education of their children. For example, the school held an information night about the school website. A hands-on guide was provided and parents were engaged in discussion about implementing more effective uses of electronic communication within the school and across the broader community. A session on cyber awareness was also held, identifying many of the social networking sites used by young people, and highlighting the potential for communication devices to generate harmful and anti-social behaviours. The school also holds workshops on the NAPLAN testing program and literacy and numeracy strategies.

Engaging parents at different stages of schooling

Although the school has focused on communicating with parents in the early years of secondary schooling (in order to lay the foundation for future interaction), there has been recent emphasis on engaging parents in the senior school process and in processes related to the key transition points. Parent engagement is seen as critical to increasing HSC completion rates through the creation of a positive and inclusive senior school culture.

Parents had input into the development of a new senior retention, engagement and attainment model. They provided feedback through a number of surveys and discussions. Parent and student bodies indicated support for school actions that provide greater opportunity for senior students through curriculum choice, vocational education, and opportunity for extension subjects and HSC programs.

The school interacts with parents and the broader community through website access, discussion forums and online surveys.

Supporting families with students experiencing difficulties

The school supports families with students experiencing difficulties by:

- taking a whole of family approach to student welfare
- involving parents in student intervention.

Taking a whole of family approach to student welfare

The school takes a whole of family approach to the provision of student welfare support.

This approach is being embedded in the overall structure and operation of the school. To ensure success and long term sustainability the school aims to build its overall capacity to implement the approach.

“I think that building that capacity within the whole school is important so that it just does not reside in me -- because quite often people build things and almost silo themselves in. Everything happens in there and when they leave all the knowledge goes with them.” (Head teacher)

Building capacity to deliver a whole of family approach to student welfare entails a multipronged strategy: The head teacher (welfare) plays an important role in managing the complex set of relationships within the school and between the school and the family, as well as the relationship with community agencies and organisations. In particular, the head teacher (welfare) supervises the work of the year level advisers, supporting them to be effective in providing welfare support to students and in engaging parents. The head teacher also ensures that welfare staff collaborate with Aboriginal staff in order to deliver a culturally inclusive service to Aboriginal students.

The year-level advisers are allocated release time to manage student welfare referrals coming from various sources: the executive team, the learning support team or the school counsellor. Students who are frequently suspended are also referred. The head teacher (welfare) provides additional assistance (as necessary) with the implementation of welfare support services to students, and families. Time is taken to provide feedback, to explore options and make decisions. Year level advisers have been provided with opportunities to develop skills necessary for managing complex conversations with students, teachers, parents and external providers. They have all undertaken the ‘Accidental Counselling Training Program’ delivered by the local welfare training organisation.

The head teacher (welfare) also ensures that teaching and learning staff are assisted to effectively manage students re-engaging in the classroom. There is a focus on the development of new understandings and skills through programs, such as, the ‘No Gap, No Excuse’ program.

Not: “Where have you been? You have got a lot a catching up to do?” But saying instead: “It’s really good to see you here today! You do have a lot to catch up on but I can help you with that!” (Head teacher)

Key staff members have been trained to develop skills in the early identification of students requiring welfare support, and relevant management strategies. Accordingly, the school has been able to more effectively respond to welfare related issues. For example, it responded to students’ concerns, emerging from the 2011 Mind Matters Survey, about the support provided to students dealing with drugs and alcohol. An awareness raising campaign was established in the school about the risks associated with drugs and alcohol. The school engaged both students and parents in developing school policies and strategies for supporting students.

The head teacher (welfare) is responsible for establishing networks and support structures within the community. This strategy is designed to reduce the burden on the school and to direct students and their families to providers of specialised services. The school aims to develop the school’s knowledge of services in the community in order to be more proactive in keeping students and families safe and to support them to work through challenging

circumstances. To that end, the head teacher (welfare) spends time in the community attending meetings and networking with a range of agencies and organisations (such as social services, employment services and youth networks).

It (the availability of time) has made a huge, huge difference in giving us time to talk to those people about what we need and the students need, what is appropriate and suitable for the school and where limits are in terms of our mandate. Sorting that out, building those lines of trust, letting someone know what we can and can't do. (Head Teacher)

The school's website was redeveloped to provide parents with information about community services, including names and details of key contacts. However, staff concluded that parents were more interested in getting information through verbal contact: through a face to face meeting or a telephone call. The provision of contact information to parents is seen to be more effective through personalised communication.

Parents were overwhelmed so to go to a website and trawl your way through was not so effective... People want the human being rather than a website. We tried various things and the feedback was quite negative. It was disappointing because I thought that some of those things were quite good. (Senior Staff)

Involving parents in student intervention

The head teacher (learning support) is responsible for leading the learning support team. This team meets once a fortnight to consider cases referred to it and to coordinate the delivery of the services. The learning support team comprises of:

- learning support teachers and officers
- Aboriginal education and community officers
- Norta Norta class tutor
- class teachers as required
- deputy principal
- assistant (learning support)
- head teacher (welfare)
- Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO)
- school counsellor
- class teacher (education unit).

South Coast High School provides a range of specialised learning support to high needs students; students with low literacy and numeracy skills; and Aboriginal students. The learning support team works closely with year level advisors (particularly those working with Year 7 and 8 students). At times, learning support staff also assist teachers by supporting high performing students, for example, through data analysis of student results.

To assist the learning support team to process referrals, a flow chart is used to guide implementation of intervention strategies. The process begins with an initial identification of a behavioural or intellectual issue by a class teacher. This teacher refers the case to the head teacher who may be required to inform the parent/carer. The intervention management strategy focuses on engaging students in learning through modified programs and learning strategies. If unsuccessful, the learning support referral form is completed by the teacher and referred to the head teacher to refer on to the learning support team. The intervention options

include:

- HSLO support and intervention
- access to tutorial program
- referral to school counsellor for assessment and subsequent referral to a range of external services (i.e. health, welfare or employment services or services provided through the regional office – approval for access to services needs to be provided by the parent/carer and the principal)
- referral to the regional student services placement committee, which can provide education unit placement, support class placement, and approval for funding support
- In-school intervention support options provided by the South Coast learning support team.²²

Targeted students are also assisted to develop their PLPs and year level advisers identify students requiring post school transition plans. Student plans are stored in the school's SENTRAL database. The PLPs help students to identify learning goals and to make plans to achieve them. They assist students to identify their learning style, favourite subjects and skills that need to be developed in the various KLAS. The plan includes a mechanism for assessing progress towards the achievement of goals.

Involving parents in the student school attendance

The school is involving parents in supporting students to attend school. The average number of absent days for students is 20 days a year and for Aboriginal students it is 40 days. Out of about 700 students, there are currently three to four students who truant during school hours on a weekly basis. A multi-pronged approach to attendance management has been developed. The key strategies for monitoring and managing attendance include:

- **organisation of parent meetings** to discuss the importance of attending school
- **provision of information to students** of the attendance policy and consequences of breaches
- **provision of advice to parents via SMS system** (if they have provided a phone number), by 11:00 am every morning, that the student is absent without a reason. Parents are asked to explain their child's non attendance.
- **implementation of period attendance check for within-school truant behaviour.** Students that are at school but missing from class are asked to provide explanations. The consequence for unexplained absence is detention. Parents are informed that students will be suspended in the event of repeated truancy.

²² E.g., NAPLAN tutorial groups, Peer Tutoring Program, program, Transition ESL, Norta Norta in-class tutor, IEPs, and alternative pathways programs.

- **provision of attendance progress reports (every five weeks) to parents** of students who have less than 90 per cent attendance. Parents are asked to assist in working out how to improve the attendance of their child/children.

The school supports students to be prepared for classroom learning.

So we meet their basic needs first - uniform, feed, supply them with books and pens, and the timetable just so that when they start class and go to class they have a chance of succeeding ... In doing that I was hoping to make the classroom a place where the kids are not getting roused on - taking away all of the excuses for themselves and also for the staff - That was helping. (Executive member)

To encourage a group of Aboriginal students to attend, a breakfast club has been established by an aide who works with the Aboriginal Education Officer. The aide is available every morning to greet students. The school has established a Learning Centre in the library that is accessible at lunch time. The room is air conditioned and pleasant. Senior students are able to access computer terminals and teachers' assistance.

There is a reality check about what school can do. It's not a problem the school can solve. A lot of people are at the survival level. We have tried homework centres and after school programs. We have had some success over the years. We tried breakfast programs. There are things that we can impact on. (Senior staff)

At times the school also engages other people to assist in resolving non-attendance issues. The Aboriginal HSLO and the Aboriginal SLO visit homes and work with families to find solutions. The head teacher (welfare) and the learning support team provide necessary services. By intervening, the school has managed to improve the attendance rate from low 80 to 89.3 percent.

Engaging Aboriginal families

The school seeks to improve the attendance and performance rates as well as facilitating effective pathways from school for Aboriginal students. Strategies implemented to that end include:

- working with the Aboriginal communities
- implementing the PaCE program
- involving parents in student learning.

Working with Aboriginal communities

The school has strong links with the Aboriginal community. A Memorandum of Understanding has been recently developed between the Aboriginal community and the school, based on shared services. The intention of formalising partnership arrangements with parents, the local government, the Aboriginal community and other education providers is to establish a genuine 'community compact' for the flexible and responsive delivery of individualised education pathways and options for students. Executive staff meet with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) once a semester. A school plan, including strategies and targets is being developed to enhance student educational outcomes.

AECG members deliver culturally inclusive teacher professional development programs that aim to connect teachers to local Aboriginal organisations and to members of the local

community, including Elders. The programs are designed to develop insights into the social, cultural, historical and economic issues affecting Aboriginal people.

The school employs Aboriginal staff who have connections to the community. School staff more generally are undertaking culturally specific training, such as *Sister Speak*. Senior staff have attended camps organised by community service organisations to bolster relationship with students. The students were engaged in cultural awareness training and had access to a number of Aboriginal people working in national parks and wildlife.

I found that a couple of the kids that used to swear at me every morning at the gate stopped doing that because they saw me as a different person (at the camp).
(Executive staff)

Implementing the PaCE Program

The school is promoting the PaCE program to Aboriginal parents. PaCE is a community driven program for parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. It supports initiatives that assist families and communities to 'reach in' to schools and other educational settings. The program aims to engage parents in their children's education by participating in educational decision making, developing partnerships with education providers, and supporting and reinforcing their children's learning at home. The program supports 'reach in' activities in order to improve educational outcomes of their children. Significantly, the program complements 'outreach' activities of schools and educational providers.

DEEWR staff facilitate stakeholder engagement processes and other processes related to project development, implementation, review and reporting and accountability. There are a number of critical stakeholders involved including parents/ caregivers, community members and education providers, and other organisations. Once a project idea has been agreed by key stakeholders a PaCE project proposal is developed.

PaCE projects managed through the AECG in collaboration with four government primary schools have included the establishment of cultural gardens, welcome to country protocols, cultural awareness training for school staff and mentoring programs and skill building activities for Aboriginal communities. Funds have been used to employ community learning officers to service the PaCE project in the community.

Involving Parents in the Student Learning

Parents are encouraged to become involved in developing Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) and in assisting students to develop goals and plans.

You get to think about what they are really thinking. I had the opportunity to read over my daughter's PLP. I was amazed about the things she wrote - I knew from what she wrote that she did have her head straight. It was good feedback for me to say "Well she does know what she wants to do." (Parent)

The Aboriginal Student Engagement Officer and the Norta Norta Tutor (who are well connected to the Aboriginal community) provide specialist tutoring and academic assistance to Aboriginal students and provide advice to parents. Aboriginal staff assist the school with

the goal of increasing the number of Aboriginal parents attending school events and completing school surveys.

Engaging the broader community in student retention

The school has established a number of significant links and connections with a range of community service providers in order to explore options for families requiring assistance. These services may be related to welfare and health needs. Building links between the school and legal support services is also increasing in significance in cases where students are ordered to attend school.

I have a lot of contact with the local police. They are fantastic. There are private discussions as to what is going on. They give us an understanding of what is going on in the student's private life - at least a dozen families. (Executive member)

There are also strong links with youth networks and training and employment providers. The private provider Campbell Page, through the Re-Connect Project Officer, facilitates transitions from school and re-engages Aboriginal students. Students are also provided with opportunities to learn through alternative, vocationally based programs. Pathways into employment opportunities are provided through 'P' Plate Program, an initiative designed for Year 10-12 Aboriginal students. The NSW police force also conducts a cultural program designed to maintain school attendance, participation and progression.

The school works with the local council, schools and community agencies to implement a project designed to link education, industry and training partners. The aim of the project is to increase the number of students staying at school. The partnership was formed to deliver an interactive and stimulating education and career market to Year 9-12 students, parents and exhibitors including local businesses.²³ The program offers students and their parents an opportunity to speak with community, industry and education representatives, to try a trade hands-on, and to collect up to date information to assist them in education choices and career options. A recommendation outlined in the school's evaluation report was the importance of including parents in the implementation of this program.

The school participates in the 'In2Uni' program in collaboration with Department of Education and Communities NSW, Illawarra and South East Region and the University of Wollongong. The program aims to enhance the students' experience at the University of Wollongong and supports student aspirations related to participation and success at higher education. The program is offered to selected primary and secondary schools participating in the Low SES National Partnerships and the PASP (PSP). South Coast Year 10 students visit Australian National University (ANU) to experience a day in the life of a university student. The program aims to inspire students from regional areas, and to raise awareness of the opportunities that begin at university. The program offers the students opportunities to experience lectures in different discipline areas.

Through community networks the school creates opportunities for engagement in community events and for supporting students to stay engaged in their learning.

They've not just dropped out of the school -dropped off the radar. We manage to

²³ Members of the partnership project include representatives of the local, state and federal government, TAFE, ACE, training organizations; industry groups, and community agencies.

keep them on a continuum...They have contacts outside the school - a person they actually know (employment agencies, people at the youth cafe, etc). They also have the skills that come from those relationships and experiences. They have learnt how to speak about their situation, where they want to go and what they think they need. That is a big thing too. (Head teacher)

The school works with the four feeder primary schools. Due to generally low results in visual literacy in NAPLAN, there is a joint approach to improving performance in that area. The school also employs a primary school teacher for half a day a week to support the transition from primary school and improve partnership with local primary schools. South Coast High School also releases a staff member to teach the advanced Year 6 students in their primary schools.

The school engages with other schools in implementing specific programs. For example, to celebrate Indigenous Games Day in December 2011, Aboriginal Year 7 and 8 students met with Aboriginal students at the local public school. Students played a mixture of Aboriginal and traditional games. These included Touch Football and Soccer, and Aboriginal games such as Kai (a game with the aim to keep a ball in the air at all times) and Wadai (a game very similar to AFL). The aim of the day was to build relationships between the Indigenous students of both South Coast schools. The day ended with a sausage sizzle and a walk back to the school.

The school implements cultural exchange programs with students in Japan. Host families welcome Japanese students into homes for a three-week period and introduce them to aspects of Australian lifestyle, cuisine and culture. South Coast students and parents have also had the opportunity to visit Japan.

Partnerships challenges

Consultations identified the following challenges for the school in developing partnerships with its parent community:

- engaging parents too busy or reluctant to be involved in the school
- involving hard to reach parents
- communicating with families
- conceptualising home environment
- collaborating on student intervention.

Engaging parents too busy or reluctant to be involved in the school

Some parents are not always able to become involved because of work commitments and involvement in community organisations.

They have commitments outside the school that pretty much teach the kids the same values. They might feel that school's okay. My child is doing okay and there is no need to do anything. I'll put my energy over here. They may not need to be involved due to other commitments. (Executive member)

Involving hard to reach parents

Parents from mid-SES backgrounds, who have a family tradition of being involved, are more likely to attend school events. On the other hand, lower SES families are less likely to become involved with the school. They may be intimidated because they left school early and do not consider themselves to be educated.

Parents indicate that some families with a tradition of negative experiences with schooling do not want to come into the school. They do not believe that their children will benefit from the educational experiences.

I'm of the generation of Indigenous parents ... who can't read and write... It's really frustrating: these people are former students of South Coast High School. They think "Look at what I got out of going to school! I got the cane!" (Parent)

I know parents who think education is a waste of time. They have been through the schooling system and came out the other end, unable to read or write and that sort of stuff. I think they felt failed by the system. They think that the system is going to fail their kids too so why bother? They are at the point where they just don't know what to do. (Parent)

Aboriginal staff are often under pressure to advocate for parents who do not come to the school. As one staff member admits that there are parents wanting her to deal with things for them. "I say to them that they need to come up to the school because I know that the teachers are approachable people and that they are like us. But the parents just listen to the kids!".

Many Aboriginal families, however, see the value of education. An Aboriginal staff member indicated that she still argued with her spouse about our son who is in Year 12. "He says he needs to go out and get a job. He has been at him for the last two years while I say - Let him finish his education first. We need the education." There is a widespread consensus about the importance of strong role models for Aboriginal students.

... Not someone who can run the 100-metre sprint in 4.2 seconds. Or kick 15 goals in one quarter. We need to be able to show our Indigenous people, especially out here. We don't have Indigenous lawyers, doctors, nurses etc. We don't have them flashed in front of the kids' eyes to say "Look, this is what you can do if you put your heads down at school..." (Aboriginal parent)

Communicating with families

Most of the conflict between the school and families is considered to be about the behaviour of students. Conflict can arise in the playground as a result of the behaviour in the playground of parents or community members (such as, smoking on school grounds).

Communication from the school to the home is also seen at times to be problematic. The monitoring of behaviour "may have a negative impact on parental engagement" (Support staff /parent).

I'll get a letter sent to my home... I don't want to deal with it because I know it's always negative. The communication we get through the mail - you get a phone call and you know it's going to be negative. (Parent)

As a parent you know that your kids can do great things. They can do rotten things

too but then they don't get recognised for the good things they do too. (Parent)

The school recognises that its communication can be a problem for some families. The school's effort to monitor student attendance "may seem like a big stick approach" according to an Executive member. The culture of primary schools is seen by some parents to be friendlier because it places greater emphasis on celebrating successes and achievements. Parents observed that primary schools provide opportunities for parents to attend award ceremonies and tend to reinforce positive behaviours. These strategies build enthusiasm for learning and engagement.

To encourage Aboriginal parents to come to the school, Aboriginal students need to be provided with more opportunities to perform and achieve. The value of high school reunions and assemblies was highlighted as these activities attracted a large number of parents into the school to see their children perform. Staff observed that as many Aboriginal students do not perform at these events, there is little incentive for Aboriginal parents to attend. The challenge for the school is to encourage Aboriginal students to participate in these activities.

The kids I worked with last year begged me to go and see them do long jumps because they were doing so well at it. I went to see them and I went to listen to them in music when they mastered their songs. It was nice to see them smiling. So if I like doing that their parents should too. (Support staff)

Student Wellbeing Needs

Concerns about the complexity of the home life of many of the Aboriginal students were expressed by staff. Families caught up in the cycle of poverty experienced issues related to housing, income, health and welfare. According to an Aboriginal parent "Education is not worth a thing if other things are not working... Many Aboriginal students are "not thinking about their homework. They are learning how to survive".

We don't know what happens when they go home... I'm a prime example of that. From the age of nine I had to worry about my brother getting his clothes off when he got home so I could wash his clothes. I came from a single parent family and I was the last one to put in an assignment at school. I had chores to do, animals to feed, the house to clean and dinner to cook. The kids here today are doing the same thing! (Support staff)

The question of the extent to which the school can accommodate the complexity in people's lives was also raised. According to Executive member, there are limitations to what the school can achieve as many of the issues faced by the families are associated with their social and economic positioning. The school leadership indicates its commitment to making a difference in the lives of students at the school through its attitude and strategies.

We have got to sell ourselves as places where kids can achieve and provide them with something they can do. (Executive member)

There is no need to make a big fuss if kids don't bring in the homework or get their assignments in on time... The teachers need to be clear about the expectations they have for their students. They need to know enough about the students to know that you don't give Billy Brown a 30 per cent assessment to take home because it's not going to happen! Give him something he can do in school time. (Support staff)

Collaborating on student intervention

A major challenge for the school is to arrive at an agreed understanding about how best to meet the needs of Aboriginal students. For many Aboriginal parents, the issue of Aboriginal students' under performance is not new. It is historical and embedded in the culture of the community. A priority for the school is to motivate students to attend school and to build their confidence and develop their aspirations to succeed. The staff are hopeful that the PaCE program will enable them to make improvements.

I can see so much potential for them. (but) You need to have the support at home.
..A lot of the kids get this all the time: "You can't do that!" (Support staff)

Staff members interact with parents and carers regarding intervention support services available for students requiring it. Conversations with parents about student learning issues can at times be difficult. Staff begin the conversation indicating that they are concerned about the situation and ask whether parents have noticed certain behaviours. They express their thoughts and offer suggestions for the consideration.

Conclusion

The school faces a number of challenges in increasing the number of parents involved in the school, particularly hard to reach parents. There are challenges associated with communicating with Aboriginal families, in particular with regard to the role of the home in students' education.

Through the Low SES SSNP the school aims to provide its families with tools to better link school and home learning. Attention has been paid to the revitalisation of the P&C Committee which has assumed a higher profile in the school. To assist parents to take on a stronger role in their children's learning, information sessions are provided. These sessions provide opportunities to learn about the school system and school strategies aimed at supporting children to improve their performance. In particular implementation of the parent engagement strategy has included accommodation of the needs of Indigenous families.

While strategies have been in place for a limited time there are some indications that the parent engagement strategy has led to change in parent expectations of the school and in their connection with their children's school learning.

9. Overview of the partnership strategies

An analysis of the six case studies reveals several areas of focus in school efforts to improve parent and community engagement:

- changing the way the school communicates with parents
- bringing parents more actively into student learning
- providing information forums and education and training workshops for parents
- provision of welfare and special needs support
- seeking feedback, input and participation
- partnering with other education providers and community agencies.

Changing the way the school communicates with parents

Several strategies are being used:

- **Regular newsletters** — disseminated to the school community in hardcopy and /or electronically. They promote parental engagement in education and ensure that parents are provided with a timely calendar of key events to enable them to support their children's engagement and plan their involvement in key activities. Student work samples are included and additional information is provided about significant school activities, such as, reading programs, ideas for holiday reading, student projects and excursions.
- **Signage and school notice boards** — to ensure that parents and community members visiting the school can navigate their way around the school, locating administration areas and learning activity areas.
- **School websites** — maintaining and updating the school website, ensuring information for parents, activities, developments, key documents, such as annual reports and annual school plans, are available.
- **Professional development focusing on staff communication skills and attitudes** — which enhance the communication between parents and teachers. Opportunities are provided for staff to develop interpersonal and intercultural communication skills and cross cultural knowledge, values and attitudes.
- **Provision of time, space and resources** —including employment of community education staff, incorporation of the liaison function into the roles of school leaders, and providing parents with access to computers and teaching and learning resources.

Bringing parents more actively into student learning

Schools are providing more opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's education through: trying to improve student reports and the way parent and teacher meetings work; greater involvement in the design of individualised learning plans; greater provision of homework support; and supporting school attendance.

Improving student reports and parent and teacher meetings

Some of the case study schools identified parent and teacher meetings, interviews and conferences as significant elements of a broader communication process between parents and teachers. For instance, schools may begin the year with informal parent and teacher meetings to facilitate relationship building – particularly for parents of students in their first year of schooling. Teachers are being encouraged to intensify their efforts to implement regular communication with parents through playground and classroom contact or email communication.

Schools are exploring ways to enhance the effectiveness of student reporting and parent and teacher meetings. Online reports sent to parents are discussed at the formal parent and teacher interviews. Some schools are trying to build their capacities to develop student data and reporting systems, to help them provide specific evidence of children's performance and the progress being made.

Individual student learning plans

Some schools are actively encouraging parents to participate in the development, implementation and ongoing review of student learning plans (i.e. PLPs and IEPs). The planning process is designed to enable teachers and parents to set goals, hold review meetings and to jointly work on motivating and encouraging students in their learning. The students' learning journey, under this method, is guided through a personalised and flexible learning approach. Individual student learning plans may include strategies related to behaviour in the school and the classroom. Indigenous students at two of the schools with large numbers of students, as well as targeted students with learning difficulties, are assisted to develop individual learning plans.

Homework / out of school hours support

Some case study schools have established a variety of opportunities to assist families to support students to do their homework. Homework clubs have been set up, providing a space, student tutoring support and teacher assistance at various times: before school, lunch times or after school. In some cases, schools invite parents to use the computer facilities and to engage with homework activity at breakfast clubs. At some schools, opportunities are also provided for parents and students to participate in out of school hours learning activities.

Providing information sessions and education and training workshops for parents

Some schools have established education and training workshops to provide parents with skills training in specific areas to assist them help their children, and most have increased

their efforts to inform parents about the school and its programs through organised information sessions. Others have designed literacy and numeracy materials for families to use at home.

The information sessions are designed to provide opportunities for parents to be better informed about:

- school vision, goals, targets, policies and programs
- NAPLAN testing— some schools are seeking parent assistance in preparing students for NAPLAN testing. Opportunity is also being given in some settings for issues with NAPLAN testing to be discussed and strategies for minimizing the unintended consequences of testing outlined.
- school efforts to improve literacy and numeracy, and strategies parents can use to support these efforts in the home. The information sessions or workshops focus on specific whole class or student intervention programs used by the schools; specific strategies used by the school that could be reinforced in the home; and strategies to assist families to support student literacy and numeracy learning at home.

At least two of the schools have provided and run a series of workshops designed to provide parents with targeted skill development for education and training in:

- Language and literacy learning
- Numeracy skill development
- Parenting skills.

One school in addition to these things has generated support materials for parents comprising games and DVDs to support numeracy learning at home, especially in the holiday periods.

Provision of special needs and welfare support

Some schools, to help support their families and ultimately the students, are actively working with community groups and agencies in order to assist parents and families where there is a need for referral services in areas of health, welfare, income support and training and further education. In some instances this involves direct support to students through providing breakfast, meals, uniforms, and books and pens.

Seeking feedback and facilitating input

- **Parent surveys** — parent surveys are used by some schools to gain information from parents about their views on different aspects of the school, classrooms and programs.
- **Parent focus groups** — groups of parents are invited to participate in focus groups to help the school get a better understanding of the parents and their views and circumstances, and to share information about the school. The focus groups are sometimes used to target specific groups in the school community, such as Indigenous parents.

- **P&C Associations** — some schools are trying to build stronger P&C associations, often where these have been viewed as operating poorly or not at all. Others are trying different approaches. Catholic Primary School, for example, does not have a formal parent body and Western High School has disbanded its P&C association, preferring to involve parents through specific parent forums. Valley Public School recognises that members of the Aboriginal community are not comfortable with being involved in the school's P&C association. Opportunities are created for Aboriginal parents and community members to become involved at the school through separate parent forums. The expectation is that Aboriginal families will at some stage become involved in the school's P&C association.

Partnering with other education providers and community organisations

Some of the schools have established relationships with other education, training and community organisation providers. They are especially focused on transition into and from their schools. Primary schools consider the relationship with early childhood providers to be important. Similarly, secondary schools are placing importance on the relationship with feeder primary schools.

Nearly all of the schools have put in place mechanisms, often through shared arrangements with other schools and providers, to better support students in their transition into and out of school. Secondary schools, for example, as well as forming closer ties with their feeder primary schools, are seeking to implement various strategies to facilitate more successful pathways into university, TAFE, apprenticeships and work. This also means establishing better relationships with a range of community and government services in order to support the educational, welfare and health needs of students and families.

10. Use of funds

The table below reflects the extent to which case study schools are using Low SES SSNP funding to implement partnership initiatives. It presents the total dollar amount of funding each school has received, and describes how funds have been allocated to directly support partnerships.

Table 10.1 Case study schools: Low SES SSNP 2012 funding and allocation related to partnership initiatives and strategies

School Name	Low SES SSNP	Partnerships initiatives and strategies	Provision of indirect support	Direct Allocation to parent partnerships (NP)
Independent College	\$750,000	Release of teachers for transition support for parents. Provision of literacy and numeracy materials to families for home use.	Provision of tutoring Contributed teacher time out of school hours Strong leadership focus on parent engagement	\$20,210
Western High School	\$682,036	Parent Engagement Officer (0.4FTE) Community Engagement Coordinator(0.2FTE)	Release time of school leaders and teachers incorporating community engagement and case management	\$60,000
North Coast Public School	\$423,803	Community Engagement Officer (1.0FTE) Learning Community Centre (LCC) Coordinator (1.0FTE)	Newly defined assistant principal role incorporating community engagement	\$113,000
Valley Public School	\$259,574	Community Engagement Officer (0.2FTE)	Professional staff released to deliver information sessions and workshops for parents	\$16,000
South Coast High School	\$735,137	Head Teacher Welfare (.4) Support Staff (.2) LSOC (.2)	Professional and paraprofessional staff to provide holistic support to students, including school and home communication.	\$80,000
Catholic Primary School	\$653,000	Parent Engagement Officer (0.2FTE) Employment of parent engagement programs external facilitators	Contributed teacher time out of school hours Strong leadership focus on parent engagement	\$38,000

The case studies have provided some insights into the complexity of schools' tasks in allocating resources across diverse domains within the Low SES SSNP. Table 1.2 demonstrated total Low SES SSNP funding for case study schools and indicated amounts specifically allocated to parent partnerships. Table 11.1 draws on case study descriptions to detail how that expenditure is broken out.

Two points must be made here. First it is clear that at times it can be difficult to differentiate between what schools are doing as a result of their inclusion in the SSNP and what they would and should be doing as standard practice. It can be difficult too to identify contributions of specific initiatives when more than one funding source is drawn on to address specific themes for reform – for example, the improvement of literacy and numeracy in Indigenous students links in with and overlaps with initiatives connecting home and school for Indigenous families. The identification of specific resource allocations therefore draws heavily on how schools themselves identify expenditures, especially in school plans. Not all allocations are identified clearly in such plans. Some incidental allocations attached to partnership initiatives – such as communications, stationery and catering expenses associated with meetings and forums – tend to be absorbed in overall school budgets.

Almost all schools allocated the bulk of their Low SES SSNP funding for parent partnership commitments to staff time release, with allocations ranging from one day a week to provision of a team-based engagement approach equating to more than one full time teacher position. Some schools employed specific staff to undertake the engagement role. In one school where no formal allocation was made the deputy principal nevertheless played an important role in reworking the school's relationship with its parent community and with external partnerships more generally.

This focus on staffing and the assignation of clearly designated roles and responsibilities around partnerships with parents reflects the importance of time and visibility in relationship-building and in engineering change. Although their contributions are not included in the calculations of resource allocations, it is identified where schools have invested heavily at a secondary level in National Partnership initiatives associated indirectly with building connections with parents – it is often the case that these support areas are in fact more resource-intensive than more direct allocations. Such areas include the time release of teachers across the school to manage student attendance and engagement initiatives reported in some schools, and the role played in all schools by leadership and in several schools by a National Partnerships coordinator who necessarily influenced and participated in program planning. Again those contributions are not built into calculations. The dominance of salary allocations does raise questions of sustainability. Some schools have described the partnership coordinator role as “seeding” strategies and activity with a view to integrating those activities into whole school approaches in coming years.

Some of the partnerships initiatives described in case studies are not reflected in the allocations outlined in Table 11.1. While significant, they are not necessarily initiatives that can be seen as resource-intensive but require, rather, the time and will of the school's leadership and community to progress. Here the Low SES SSNP provides a context or framework for change. An example here may be a number of schools' divergent approaches to parent committees, framed recently as part of a broader approach to partnerships. While schools differed on their approaches the common theme here was their ability to take the

opportunity to modify their local approaches to governance committees and to information forums to better meet local community needs – opportunities made possible in the context of enhanced consultation and reflection afforded by the Low SES SSNP.

11. Challenges and directions

Some case study schools identified areas of impact and success, such as increases in the number of parents involved in the school, an increase in the number of Aboriginal parents who are more confident to enter the school, greater family participation in school activities and features such as homework centres, and improved relationships and functioning of P&C Associations.

However, consultations with the schools revealed five common areas of challenge where continued effort is still required:

- achieving greater parental involvement in the school
- connecting with parents in socially and culturally diverse communities
- partnering with critical social and cultural groups
- managing tensions between home and the school
- managing the implementation of the partnership strategies.

Achieving greater parental involvement

A number of factors have been identified as barriers to achieving greater parental involvement in schools.

Schools operate in an ever changing social, cultural, economic, geographic and political environment. A concern expressed at case study schools was that that parents and community members often have limited time due to demanding or long-hour jobs and busy personal lives. This development is seen to be part of a broader social trend, with fewer people involved in clubs and social organisations, and weaker neighbourhood and social networks producing a weaker sense of ‘community’. School is affected in the same way.

Schools have observed an increasing number of grandparents performing the role of carer, including the high number of elderly Aboriginal grandparents taking responsibility for students.

Schools perceive parental involvement to be more difficult in upper primary school and in secondary schools. Parents and carers of students attending larger schools are also seen to be more difficult to involve in the school. Parents are also perceived to be more likely to become involved with their first born child.

Connecting with parents in socially and culturally diverse communities

Schools have highlighted challenges related to connecting with diverse parent and community groups in their schools. This diversity is reflected in the emergence of a wider range of perceptions, interests and needs. There is realisation that a ‘one size’ model does not work and that schools need to intervene to ensure that all parent voices are heard in the school. Schools are challenged to ensure that effective strategies are in place to minimise

dominance of groups and to facilitate harmonious relationships.

Partnering with specific social and cultural groups

In some schools there are three distinct and overlapping social and cultural parent groups: those from LBOTE backgrounds; those from low SES backgrounds; and Aboriginal parents and carers.

LBOTE parents / carers

English language skills are a key factor impacting on school partnerships with LBOTE families. Schools have strategies in place to help integrate newly arrived students, and to communicate with parents through having documents and other communications translated. However, communication remains an ongoing issue.

Schools indicated in interviews that LBOTE parents have a tendency to ‘trust’ the school with their children’s learning, to not get directly involved, and to place high expectations on the education being delivered. Their children are ‘expected to do well’ and the families often have high expectations for what education can do for them, opening up options for their future with regard to employment and the quality of their lives. These family values, while consistent with school goals, often exist alongside an expectation that the ‘school will deliver’ and the parent remains an observer rather than a partner, particularly given the difficulties due to English language skills.

Low SES parents / carers

In school consultations, it was often mentioned that facilitating partnerships with parents or carers who are Australian born and welfare dependent, and have low education and low literacy levels, is highly challenging. These parents tend to be more hesitant in becoming involved and more willing to observe the school than to participate, and to remain remote from the school.

As these parents have no or a limited tradition of being involved in schools, many do not seem to perceive that there is a role for them in the school. They seem to consider teaching and learning to be the responsibility of the school and its staff. These parents are seen to lack identification with the school and to lack confidence in supporting their children due to their low levels of literacy and numeracy skills.

Aboriginal parents and carers

Schools with sizeable Indigenous student populations frequently mentioned that partnerships with Aboriginal parents can be highly challenging because of a complex set of needs. Many of the Aboriginal families are trapped in a poverty cycle, with compounded issues related to housing, health, welfare, transportation and employment. Their social circumstances have an impact on family structures with many elderly grandparents taking on the roles of carers.

As many parents and carers did not attend school, there is little history of involvement with schools. Parents and carers who attended school (in some cases the same school), were likely to have had negative experiences of schooling because they did not benefit from the experience. In some communities, Aboriginal people have come from a wide variety of places and do not identify with place or necessarily with their Aboriginal heritage.

For these reasons, schools indicated that connecting Aboriginal parents and carers with the school is a major challenge.

Managing tensions between the home and the school

A number of tensions were evident in the case study schools between school and home. This was most noticeable in the following areas:

- disciplinary issues, suspensions and return to school processes – the focus is often on negative communication, highlighting rather than overcoming problems.
- the individualised approach²⁴ to supporting students is often perceived by Aboriginal families to be confronting and intrusive.
- teacher perceptions of the ‘low SES’ home environment – teachers often describe their role and the role of school as one of needing to compensate for lack of support in the home.
- negative community image of student intervention strategies – some parents express concerns about the consequence of implementing intervention strategies, such as the negative labelling of students, stigmatising, and the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies. Schools can find it hard to have ‘difficult conversations’ with parents.
- perceived limits on what the school can address (“there’s only so much we can do”) and therefore how successful it can be given the complex needs of students and their families – schools sometimes identify a limit to their role and place greater emphasis on whole of government, and other agency, responsibility (the ‘shifting’ or ‘handballing’ of the problem).

Future Directions

Case study schools have reported an increase in the number of parents engaging with the schools. Strategies such as, the employment of CEOs and Indigenous specific liaison personnel as well as the implementation of specific activities, are starting to facilitate improvements in home and school partnerships.

However, it is difficult to assess the overall impact of the partnerships strategy given efforts directed at building school capacities in other areas. Effective indicators of success for parental engagement activity need to be developed, providing schools with feedback on their efforts. These indicators may relate to changes in: family practices (i.e. expectations and quality of home environment), levels of trust between groups and attitudes of members of the school community, quality of home and school partnership activities, and student attitudes and level of engagement in learning.

In order to continue building and sustaining support structures and creating the conditions for effective family and community engagement practices, key areas to address include:

²⁴ The PLPs approach is recognised to be an improvement to the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) approach because promotes the active engagement of students and families.

- developing a whole school approach to parental and community engagement, incorporating it into school planning, policies, operations and practices
- building leadership and staffing capacity, ensuring a focus on developing relationships of trust and respect and building parent capacity to support their children in their learning
- allocating an adequate level of resources, such as identifying physical space, providing access to computers, employing community liaison staff and incorporating the partnerships function in all roles of key staff
- recruiting competent, skilled and effective community engagement staff with connections to community groups, and providing opportunities for skill development and assistance with implementation
- building structures and processes that facilitate family and community input in school decision making and participation in teaching and learning
- engaging teachers by: managing resistance; addressing concerns such as the need for additional time, quality assurance, and confidentiality; building confidence; and developing their knowledge, skill and attitudes
- taking a staged approach to implementation, ensuring that foundations are put into place that enable the school to improve the quality of partnerships. This includes encouraging families to be academically focused, and committed to providing learning support at home.

12. Next Steps

This report comprises the first of four focus studies on external partnerships planned as part of the School External Partnerships Evaluation. Its focus on parents reflects the significance of the school-parent partnership and the extent to which schools taking part in the Low SES National Partnerships have emphasised enhancement of relationships with parent communities in their planning.

Between 2013 and 2015 three further focus studies will be undertaken. As with this study they will assist in building an understanding of school level experiences and strategic responses to the implementation of the external partnership initiatives. Capturing the detail of the school level experience – across systems, sectors and regions – is important given the complexities associated with an evaluation of partnership-based initiatives.

The choice of topics for analysis will be informed by literature reviews, system-level data analysis and advice from stakeholders at the school, diocesan, regional and system levels. We have provisionally identified a number of distinct themes for closer investigation in future studies. As with this parent-focused study these projected focus studies will involve extensive contact with a number of schools broadly representative of the Low SES SSNP schools cohort in NSW. Schools across all sectors will be enlisted for this new focus study work, while contact will be retained with current case study schools. This will extend the reach and representativeness of the studies over time and build a picture of how partnership initiatives develop over the life of the Low SES SSNP at the school level. It will also provide a context for schools to share strategies and experiences around specific themes.

The current agreed program for the focus studies, identifying topics and timelines, is offered in Table 11.1.

Table 12.1 Provisional Topics for Focus Studies

No.	Title	Topic	Time in schools	Report Date
Focus Study 1	Parent engagement	Strategies to engage parents /carers in schooling and to raise parental expectations and support for students	May-June 2012	Sept 2012
Focus Study 2	School – university partnerships	Strategies to promote school-university partnerships	Feb-Mar 2013	April 2013
Focus Study 3	ATSI community engagement	Strategies to engage ATSI community members	Feb-Mar 2014	April 2014
Focus Study 4	Extended Transition to school	Strategies to enhance the “school readiness” of children from disadvantaged communities	Feb-Mar 2015	April 2015

School-university partnerships constitute a growing area of activity with a strong focus on

building academic outcomes and aspirations, and on promoting post compulsory pathways. Such partnerships are proposed as the subject for a focus study in 2013.

This current study of parent engagement strategies has identified a range of initiatives undertaken by some schools in working with their Indigenous communities. Moreover, according to ARTD Consultants²⁵, 29 per cent of the initial cohort of 295 schools was involving Aboriginal elders and community members in classrooms. A further 33 per cent (which could include the same schools) reported that they were employing partnership officers in Aboriginal communities. ATSI community engagement is therefore proposed as the focus of the third focus study in 2014.

In the initial cohort of Low SES SSNP schools, nearly two thirds reported implementing extended transition to school programs. Moreover, 77 per cent of the initial cohort of schools reported engagement with external service providers for enhanced support for students and their families -- they were “Expanding school services” through initiatives such as implementing support services (33 per cent), providing homework centres (15 per cent), providing before and after school care (4 per cent) and brokering services (2 schools). The provision of extended services for students could be an alternative focus group study in 2015.

The current series of case studies has shed light on ways in which schools interact with their broader communities and areas where specific schools see opportunities for generating stronger external partnerships. It is anticipated that the planned surveys of school leaders and teachers will assist in identifying some of the range of activity in this area.

²⁵ Evaluation of Initial Implementation, 22 March 2010, P 28

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