



## NOW'S THE AGE TO ENGAGE

An issues paper on parent engagement in the Queensland Catholic education system

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose parents, schools and the Church share in a Catholic education is to enrich both the faith and learning skills our children need as they grow into an increasingly complex world. It is the greatest gift a parent can provide and each year many parents spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of time to provide that opportunity.

They are supported by state and Church investment in the role of educating a child which begins with birth and, ideally, continues for life.

For seven hours a day, five days a week, children venture into Catholic School classrooms to get the best possible education delivered with skill and dedication by trained professionals who too often work without the knowledge and experience of the adults who best understand their charges.

Both schools and parents are doing what they see as best practice. Each is playing to their strengths - parents raising children to value the education they receive and creating a supportive home environment for learning; schools providing the learning base and facilities that build the scaffolding children need. And, most importantly, the students who can both benefit from and inform our practices.

Together, they form a triangle: parents, schools and students. Assembled tightly, it is an enduring and potent force to better individual lives and the life of our community.

The world has changed. It is now more connected, individuals and networks are more technologically enabled and communication has become faster and more important. This is a world where partnerships create strength. It's time for us as parents in the Catholic school system to consider how we can build the partnerships that bind us with our schools to enhance the potential of our children.

The learning development of our children will be at the centre of this. How much better will learning outcomes be if they draw on the full capacity of our families and community to complement the teaching skills of our Catholic education system both at school and at home?

**What** if parents could gain the confidence they need to be part of the dinner table discussion on their children's learning - from learning the alphabet through to the attributes of the periodic table of elements?

**What** if teachers wrestling with information technology had the voluntary support of IT professionals willing to be more active in their school communities?

**What** if classes learning about enterprise were able to draw on the skills of the many tradespeople, business managers and entrepreneurs who make up our communities?

**What** if STEM teachers were able to tap into the professional scientists and aligned professionals whose role is often limited to school drop-off?

**What** if teachers of manual and technical skills could draw on the wide range of skills parents already use in the workforce?

**What** if the many cultural practices that will attune our students to a more complex world became part of school life?

**What** if teachers of creative subjects were able to use the skills of professional musicians, artists, writers or performers to add an edge to their classrooms?

Parents already play a role in our system. They are our children's first teachers, they choose which educational paths they will follow, they fund formal education and their activities have funded thousands of facilities that improve the environment of Queensland Catholic schools.

But there has been a line between these roles and a role in the most important part of what our schools do - the classroom education of children. There is a worldwide movement to redress this, to shift parents' roles from "involvement" to "engagement".

We have been looking closely at this and this paper proposes a shift in emphasis on the part parents can play in the education of their children.

Educational researcher Dr Debbie Pushor, who has been working with us on this describes involvement activities as using parents as "audience, spectators, fundraisers, aides and organisers".

All are important roles but do not tap the capacity of parents or recognise the stake they have taken in their children's education from birth.

She writes: "Involvement requires a capable adult; it is something any warm body can do. In contrast, engagement requires the contribution of an individual, in the capacity of a caregiver, who has lived experience with children and knowledge of children, teaching and learning garnered over time in a variety of contexts and situations."

Our experience is that parents relish the chance to be genuinely engaged in their children's education when they have the skills, means, opportunity and support to do so. Even a subtle shift in position will require us to recast the relationship at both diocesan and local level between school leadership, teachers and parents. Underpinning this is respect for the roles we each have but, most importantly, for the rights of our children to the best educational prospects.

This cannot happen overnight - but the time is right to start.

Everything we know about the world tells us that education must change to match the needs of a changing workforce. By the time this year's prep students graduate in 2030, it's almost certain that any job that can be automated will be automated.

The rise of new technologies creates capacity for jobs we once believed to be the preserve of humans (many part of professional roles for instance) to be increasingly done by machines.

The skills our children will need in that world are different to those that have served us. It's agreed that STEM skills will matter more than ever. But the thinking and problem solving skills that come from creative subjects will also matter as will the ability to work collaboratively.

The one skill that will count the most is the ability and desire to learn and to be adaptable to new working environments.

We can't yet say what those working environments will be - but some of the steps already taken in our classrooms will help our children be a stronger part of that future. This is not just about what they learn but how they learn and how they can apply their learning skills through life.

This is as much a matter for parents and the lead we set as it is for the teachers and schools we have traditionally relied on for learning. It's important that we as parents and as a parent organisation also take the steps that make us participants, not just bystanders, in our children's future.

We can already do this at home - by ensuring our children leave for school physically nourished and ready to learn; by emphasising the value of their education by sharing in what they are learning and by influencing their healthy attitude to learning as a process that never ends.

Collectively, we can do more. The rationale for P&F groups has evolved over the life of the Catholic education system. Fundraising is important but is less crucial as our system matures and the quality of facilities in many of our schools improve.

Over time, thanks to Catholic educators of the past, the ability of parents to be active in the education of their children has also improved - even if the demands of modern living make it harder to be engaged in the traditional ways in the school community.

The challenges we face with educating our children for an uncertain future create both the opportunity and imperative for parents to become more deeply engaged in different ways in the schools which are so important to the lives of their families.

### THE STEPS WE PROPOSE

As the major focus of the organisation, we have also made this the focus of our annual conference in June. Material we hope will prompt deep consideration and discussion is published here - <https://cspqld.schoolzineplus.com/the-age-to-engage-document-2019>

In the first instance, it involves renaming our organisation to become Catholic School Parents Queensland and its affiliates to better reflect what we want to achieve and align them to our national body, Catholic School Parents Australia. This naming pattern will flow through to school level. It involves adopting a new statement defining our mission. It is to: "work with Catholic School authorities to build capacity of school staff and families to create tools to assist in building stronger partnerships in each school community that foster engagement and result in shared responsibilities for student learning and for student and school success".

### The means to achieve this at all levels are summarised here:

School level	Diocesan level	State level
1. Reinvigorate parent connections at schools	1. Reinvigorate connection between school and diocesan councils.	1. Build better connections between all levels
2. Move to a more up-to-date purpose with flexibility for what works in each school.	2. Diocesan council to support local Catholic School parents in leading learning.	2. Be leaders of parent engagement in Qld
3. Change focus from fundraising to supporting and engaging in our children's learning	3. Focus for connection for local school to CSPQ.	3. Refocus our mission and vision on parent engagement in learning and wellbeing.
4. Change school organisation names to align with Catholic School Parents Qld and Australia		4. Align with national body - Catholic School Parents Australia.

A few binding principles underpin this approach at all levels. They can be summarised as respecting that families and schools each have unique contributions to education but shared responsibility improves student learning and motivation and strengthens the connections between schools and their communities.

The challenge is in how to enact this and, importantly, how we support and excite all participants in our system with the potential. The shift starts with leadership at a state level through the refocused mission, extends to diocesan level with support for parents and ends at school level with specific strategies and actions that suit the needs of each community.

This does not involve doing more. But it does involve doing things differently. It involves making changes with respect for the roles of parents, teachers, school administrators and Church leaders at every level.

Part of it is to take the emphasis off fundraising as the primary activity of parent groups and shift it to broader and meaningful participation in school life. Part of it is to help teachers and schools better understand the capacity of parents to be more engaged with the education of their own children and of the broader school community.

It involves allocation of resources (both people and investment) to implement engagement activities, creation of support networks to help school communities share best practices, ongoing professional learning for staff and the opportunity for families to build their capacity to support children's learning at home.

This is not a challenge to the authority of teachers in the classroom. Nor is it a mandate for parents to reshape the curriculum. But, done correctly, it attracts more parents to engage more deeply in the life of schools and provides them with a strong resource base that helps better educate students.

Technology is an important asset in this; our school learning systems already give our students more capacity to learn anywhere, anytime. At the same time, they give parents greater visibility of their children's education.

### **WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE**

Children begin learning from birth, and education is a life-time journey. Parents' engagement, before children attend school, is recognised widely - through everything from courses to government-funded payments. Parents continue that engagement, once their children have started school. They ferry them to sport, and barrack from the sidelines. They listen to practice after practice ahead of a guitar exam. They make costumes and style children for ballet and drama. They coach them football skills. They help them build complex models and they talk to them about what's happening in the world. But all those activities - and that engagement - happens outside school hours.

Their involvement in formal academic learning rests with trying to assist with homework, or in some cases, employing a tutor.

This difference - between parental engagement with their children in extra-curricular activities outside school hours and their engagement inside school hours - is the heart of our narrative. The ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth) says that "by participating in and facilitating diverse learning experiences and activities outside the school, parents become an important factor in children's overall learning and education". That makes common sense. But that learning is often on family holidays, or through a hobby or sport, and without any real partnership with the school. Engagement is the missing link. "Considered broadly, parental engagement consists of partnerships between families, schools and communities, raising parental awareness of the benefits of engaging in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so," ARACY found. It used Muller (2009) to make this point: "Family-school and community partnerships are re-defining the boundaries and functions of education. They enlarge parental and community capacity; they create conditions in which children learn more effectively. In these ways they take education beyond the school gates."

Research both in Australia and overseas is unanimous in pointing to the advantage of this engaged approach, and while this is widely understood amongst educators, it is not necessarily understood by parents. It is crucial for parents to see and understand the research that shows their engagement can lead to a variety of educational bonuses - from lower drop-out rates to higher marks, and more chance of post-secondary education.

Beyond academic achievement, parental engagement can deliver their children improved student behaviour and social skills, and allow students to understand the importance of a strong education.

Economic modelling of the impact of parental engagement is limited, but one study by Houtenville and Conway is frequently cited, after finding "parental effort (the combination of all kinds of engagement) has a large effect on student achievement compared with school resources (e.g. per pupil spending on teaching). The magnitude of this effect was equivalent to more than \$1,000 in per-pupil spending per annum, and improved academic outcomes to levels equivalent to those of students whose parents had received an additional four to six years of education."

While engagement is a game-changer in education, best-practice on delivering it is less clear. There is no doubt, though, that it must be done in partnership with school communities, with the support of educational leaders, and focused on measurable responses for students. This triangle between families, schools and students needs to be built on respect, trust, a clear delineation of roles, and excellent communication. It must be flexible, developed at the school level with Diocesan support for parents to lead learning. It needs to be underpinned by a recognition of the role and importance of the family in a Catholic education. The relationship between the school principal and the head of the designated parent group is absolutely vital. Engagement will look different, in each school, depending on its size, needs, the preparedness of parents to 'get onboard', the encouragement of the school leadership team, and good will on both sides. At the school level, it needs policies, procedures and communication that encourages parents to be engaged, while clearly respecting the role of educators within the school. It needs a means of measuring parental engagement and its success over time. At a parenting level, it needs an understanding of the research that shows the benefit to their child of active engagement. And together, it needs a team to develop, organise, implement and evaluate how engagement might look.

At a minimum level, it might mean a parents' night, where teachers explain the syllabus ahead and how parents can help outside school hours. Or it could mean providing parents with the research that shows how engagement helps. Or facilitating room in the school newsletter for information from parents, or the school's parent organisation. At a more 'involved' level, it might mean a register of parents' talents is set up in the principals office allowing teachers to call on parents who offer a specific expertise - from space exploration to setting up a business. Or it might mean regular parent-teacher relaxation nights, where educators and parents get to know each other better. Or highlighting a family on the school website each week. At a more serious level, perhaps a designated room could be set up for parents to visit, and make themselves a cup of coffee. Or perhaps parents could be invited to some school lessons, on a particular day each term.

The implementation of this is crucial, but it will flow from ideas at the school and parent community level. What is paramount is an understanding of the importance of this engagement, and a will to put it into practice.

## THE CHALLENGES

**Better understanding that involvement is not engagement:** This needs to be part of an active conversation in our school communities that begins with explaining how our classrooms and the activities within them are changing and ends with parents actively offering their engagement in school learning activities. While parents' contributions are actively accepted in organising sports teams, cultural activities and fundraising, we need to build the case that this reaches a higher level (to the benefit of students) once they become involved in learning engagement;

**Shifting thinking at every level:** Beneath this shift is a realignment of roles, some of which have been cemented into our system over decades. We need to approach this with respect and caution as our intention is not to bury the old ways but to complement them with new ways. This applies not just to parent groups and their leaders but to school councils, administrators and teachers who must be convinced this does not challenge their professionalism and authority;

**Resourcing to help both schools and parents:** Strong will alone will not help this succeed. The conversations to take place will need to be professionally conducted with strong understanding of the options and active sharing of others' successes and failures. In some cases, this will require parent organisations to find new skills, some of which have not been seen as valuable under the traditional model. It will require CSPQ (with diocesan support) to help identify those skill needs and provide training options for those stepping into them. It will also require understanding that new ways of thinking will not be adopted evenly, that some communities, education professionals and parents will move at a different pace to others;

**Structures, policies and procedures:** This change, like all change, will work best if it is done with clear goals and clear means of achieving them. The right structures, policies and procedures to implement engagement will support this and, as importantly, minimise or eliminate conflict that may arise;

**Measuring success:** Each school needs to be able to map its progress and share its successes and failures for the benefit of others. Clear progress on success will secure the changed behaviours which we are seeking to the benefit of future cohorts of students;

**Realistic timeline:** This change is a lengthy (possibly unending) process. As a peak parent body, it's important to agree on deadlines for key achievements - ranging from policy endorsement and acceptance to initial implementation to wide scale and complete implementation.

### **THE GAINS WILL BE WORTH IT**

Home-related factors account for as much as half the variance in students' test scores, by some estimates, compared with about 20 percent attributable to schools. This is not surprising, given the commitments our parents have made to education. From Kirra to Cairns and from Boulia to Bundaberg, strong and targeted parental engagement is the key to unlocking even more potential in our schools. The challenge is how, and over what time frame. While it would be foolhardy to underestimate the challenges, the gains will be significant, and life-long. It's a journey we owe our children.



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