



AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL INC.

The National Federation of Organisations Representing Parents of Non-Government School Students

Submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Teacher Education 2005

“...The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children succeed, not just in school, but in life...”

(Henderson & Berla, 1994)

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Summary of Recommendations

- ❖ The current Inquiry must take into account the primary role of parents and their legitimate expectations of schools and teachers.
- ❖ The training and professional development of teachers must start to better equip new and experienced teachers to promote and facilitate parent engagement in both the school and home environments.
- ❖ Reformation of teacher education must take into account
 - the environment of schools,
 - the working conditions and remuneration offered to teachers,
 - practices for the selection, recruitment and appointment of teachers,
 - professional development and career pathways,
 - opportunities that school leaders are able to offer teachers to exercise their own professionalism,
 - the need for specific training/preparation for those going into rural and remote areas, with the possibility of all trainee and new teachers being required to have some exposure to rural schooling environments.
- ❖ Teachers need training and specific skills to build relationships with families in all their diversity. To this end, teacher training should include the development of skills of adaptation and flexibility.
- ❖ The impact of the media in the education and development of children needs to be well understood by teachers.
- ❖ The achievement of the National Goals for Schooling depends on a systematic and effective partnership between parents and teachers to actively engage parents in the educational and schooling experiences of their children.
- ❖ Improvements in schooling outcomes for all students must take account of the potential of parent and family involvement with teachers and schools to minimise the effects of disadvantage, to engage in the promotion of well being and resilience building and generally, to enhance the work of teachers.
- ❖ Teachers need the active support of parents to most effectively help students learn.
- ❖ People wishing to enter the teaching profession should be able to demonstrate and have a strong commitment to the identified nine values for Australian schooling.
- ❖ Teacher education curriculum should include psychology, the stages of child development and communication as core elements.
- ❖ There ought be more opportunity for trainee teachers to undergo longer periods of practical work in schools, with this commencing as early as possible after they commence training.

- ❖ Reforms to teacher training should include a greater emphasis on in-school classroom training experience and developing the capacity of new teachers to engage with parents within the working/learning environment.
- ❖ Pre-service teacher education, and in-service courses and programmes must include materials on the resource that parents represent to teachers, how to harness and nurture that resource effectively and how best to develop and nurture true partnership with parents.
- ❖ Creation of partnership between teachers and parents, homes and schools, needs to be based on mutual respect and valuing of what parents do and what teachers do, as expressed in the National Family/School Partnerships Framework.

Introduction

The Australian Parents Council Incorporated (APC) was founded in 1962 and represents the schooling interests of the parents of Australia's non-government school students in both systemic and independent schools. The APC is non party-political and non-denominational.

Preamble

One of the key principles that informs and underpins the work of the APC is that parents are the primary educators of their children. In that context, teachers and schools are considered to support and enhance the role of parents in providing their children with the type of education the parents choose for their children. The diversity of Australian schooling options reflects the diversity of parental expectations.

Research has shown that parents generally seek a school education that provides a blend of academic achievement with the balance of a well-rounded and well-adjusted person. They expect that their children will be prepared for work and life. They want their children to be cared for pastorally and known as individuals. Parents are looking for teachers to provide an environment in which their sons and daughters can develop a strong sense of self worth and social responsibility as well as a strong sense of connectedness and belonging.

It is increasingly the case that parents themselves have higher levels of education than in the past. They understand the importance of equipping children for life and lifelong learning. They look to teachers to assist them in this responsibility and hope that teachers will be equipped to share these aspirations for their children.

Being an organisation that represents the schooling interests of non-government school parents, the APC does not presume to have specialist expertise relating to what constitutes optimum curriculum content, excellent pedagogical practice or best practice in the education and training of new teachers, in a technical sense. Those things are rightly the domains of professional educators - albeit parents can and do make a significant contribution to the identification of how curriculum, pedagogical practice and teacher training and professional development interact and impact upon the education experiences and outcomes of school students.

Parents will continue to seek to choose the most suitable school for their child, and are prepared to invest in education, often at considerable personal sacrifice. They need access to valid information about teaching and teaching outcomes. They expect schools and teachers to invite and welcome their participation and involvement to support their children's experiences and learning at school. This is not universally the case.

Whilst many parents willingly give of their time to assist schools, they become frustrated if they volunteer that time (many especially adjust their working lives to do so) only to be assigned basic tasks such as photocopying or stapling worksheets and cooking sausages; their enthusiasm wanes if they end up feeling under-utilised and unappreciated. Helping parents understand the needs of teachers, and helping teachers understand how to optimise parents as partners in the schooling enterprise is the key to successful and valuable partnerships. Bringing the two elements together to form strong partnerships is challenging,

but research continues to demonstrate that immeasurable benefits result for teachers, students and their families when it is achieved.

The current Inquiry must take into account the primary role of parents and their legitimate expectations of schools and teachers. Factors outside school are a significant determinant in students' learning outcomes. Today's parents are able to provide a significant resource for teachers to draw upon in enhancing their critical professional undertaking. How those factors might be harnessed and developed is essential knowledge for teachers. The training and professional development of teachers must start to better equip new and experienced teachers to promote and facilitate parent engagement in both the school and home environments.

Therefore, our submission does not attempt to address the broad spectrum of this Inquiry's Terms of Reference. Rather, it will primarily focus on Terms of Reference 2 and 7.

Australia's Teachers

The APC believes that the skill and performance of Australia's teachers is demonstrable. They have placed this country high on comparative standards of international student performance. Australia's results in the domains of reading, problem solving and in mathematical and scientific literacy were at the forefront in the 2003 results of the Programme for International Student Assessment, with the OECD average scores exceeded in all four areas.

However, on the evidence, it is also apparent, that the variation in student outcomes in Australian schools in a variety of areas is wider than in other countries. The diversity of cultures in Australia perhaps provides a partial explanation, but it is an issue that nonetheless needs to be addressed.

The impact of technology on the economic and social fabric of the country have imposed imperatives for improved high level thinking and social skills and relevant skills for work and life for **all** school students. The APC agrees that building '*a culture of continuous innovation in Australia's schools in the longer term*' and ensuring '*that talented people are attracted to teaching as a career, especially in the fields of science and technology education*' are essential goals.

If these are to be achieved, the APC believes that consideration must be given to:

- the environment of schools
- the working conditions and remuneration offered to teachers,
- practices for the selection, recruitment and appointment of teachers,
- professional development and career pathways,
- opportunities that school leaders are able to offer teachers to exercise their own professionalism.
- the need for specific training/preparation for those going into rural and remote areas, with the possibility of all trainee and new teachers being required to have some exposure to rural schooling environments.

In addition, APC believes that a cause of teacher stress is the inability of many teachers to form strong relationships with parents, and that this area needs to be closely examined.

Teachers need training and specific skills to build relationships with families. Research has indicated that about forty per cent of the variation in student outcomes is related to factors outside the school, but little attention is given to helping new teachers learn to work with the parents of their students. Similarly, little attention seems to be paid to equipping teachers to deal with separated and sole parents, and encouraging and/or facilitating their participation in the education process. In-service and professional development opportunities suffer from the same lack.

The case for teacher/parent partnerships

The APC supports the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century and its vision for high quality schooling. The preamble of the Declaration acknowledges the role of parents as the first educators of their children and the central role of teachers in the learning process.

We applaud the thrust of the goals that all students, regardless of their background, should have the opportunity to develop fully their talents and capacities. We believe that the achievement of the goals depends on a systematic and effective partnership between parents and teachers to actively engage parents in the educational and schooling experiences of their children.

Parents have a vital interest in the quality, availability, and practice of Australia's teachers and the effect of these factors on students' schooling outcomes. Parents know that the outcomes of schooling are particularly influenced by the quality of teaching in the classroom, and research findings support this view.

Teachers, however, need the active support of parents to most effectively help students learn. Research also supports the fact that a significant proportion of the variation in learning outcomes for students is due to individual characteristics that influence learning outcomes such as socio-economic background, family support for education and ethnic and language background.

Improvements in schooling outcomes for all students must take account of the potential of parent and family involvement with teachers and schools to minimise the effects of disadvantage, to engage in the promotion of well being and resilience building and generally, to enhance the work of teachers. Teachers generally acknowledge the significant role of parents in education. Just as for parents, the more positive experience teachers have of parents' participation, the more their practice will seek to draw parents into partnership.

The APC believes that pre-service training and the in-service of teachers should highlight the extensive research on the effect of parent involvement in children's learning and practical ways in which the closer co-operation of teachers and parents can be achieved.

Teacher Selection and Training - particular aspects

People wishing to enter the teaching profession should be able to demonstrate and have a strong commitment to the identified nine values for Australian schooling, these being:

Care and Compassion: care for self and others.

Doing Your Best: seek to accomplish something worthy and admirable, try hard, pursue excellence.

Fair Go: pursue and protect the common good where all people are treated fairly for a just society.

Freedom: enjoy the rights and responsibilities of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control, and stand up for the rights of others.

Honesty and Trustworthiness: be honest, sincere and speak the truth.

Integrity: act in accordance with principles of moral and ethical conduct ensure consistency between words and deeds.

Respect: treat others with consideration and regard, respect another person's point of view.

Responsibility: Be accountable for one's own actions, resolve differences in constructive, non-violent and peaceful ways, contribute to society and to civic life, take care of the environment.

Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion: Be aware of others and their cultures, accept diversity within a democratic society, being included and including others.

The APC believes that teacher education curriculum should include psychology, the stages of child development and communication as core elements. The impact of the media in the education and development of children also needs to be well understood by members of the teaching profession.

Further, teacher training should also include the development of skills of adaptation and flexibility. These are most important skills as teachers are required to relate to a wide variety of people, personalities and situations during their professional lives.

There ought be more opportunity for trainee teachers to undergo longer periods of practical work in schools, with this commencing as early as possible after they commence training. Reforms to teacher training should include a greater emphasis on in-school classroom training experience and developing the capacity of new teachers to engage with parents within the working/learning environment.

The APC also believes that pre-service teacher education, and in-service courses and programmes must include materials on the resource that parents represent to teachers, how to harness and nurture that resource effectively and how best to develop and nurture true partnership with parents.

While some sixty per cent of the variation in learning outcomes has been found to be due to what happens in the classroom and the school, the rest is down to influences outside the school, such as socio-economic background, family support for education, ethnic and language background, gender and other social and demographic variables.

Should trainee teachers and practising teachers study and understand the powerful influence that the support, encouragement and attitudes of families and parents has on student learning outcomes, the potential to significantly improve teacher effectiveness and teacher morale would be greatly improved. As would developing in them a comprehensive understanding of the support and assistance available from government, non-government and community organisations.

The National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education say:

1.13.2 Working with Others

Graduates should have developed an understanding of the roles of parents and other caregivers in schooling in terms of both the education of parents' own children and through representative organisations at the school.

Graduates need to have an understanding of models of partnership with parents in the context of their understanding of teacher professionalism, to know the structures of parent participation in the settings for which they are being prepared and to have developed an ability to work with parents.

They should have an ability and commitment to foster positive relationships with students, families and communities. Graduates should be able, for example, to develop close partnerships between home and school, which allow them to gain insights into the experiences and practices of literacies of their students' families and communities and to adapt their practices at school to optimise students' learning."

These 'Working with Others' goals will be achieved if comprehensive materials that prepare teachers for family involvement are offered, underpinning teacher training across all teaching levels. Practical information should be offered on establishing communication with parents, about how adults learn, conflict resolution, the skills and attitudes involved in engaging parents and what models of parent engagement work best.

Creation of partnership between teachers and parents, and schools and homes, needs to be based on mutual respect and valuing of what parents do and what teachers do. More and more, this concept of partnership in schooling is being talked about and worked towards, as evidenced by the development of the Family/School Partnerships Framework and its impending trialling in schools across Australia.

The partnership construct is based on the premise that collaborating partners have some common basis for action and a sense of mutuality that supports their joint ventures. For teachers and parents the common basis is the fostering of positive growth and lifelong learning in students, to try and ensure that young people can lead worthwhile lives (however that might be defined in different contexts) and make a positive contribution to society.

The knowledge, beliefs and understandings of teachers and principals about the importance of the closer involvement of parents will decide whether initiatives are taken on parent/teacher partnerships.

In her 2003 Literature Review of Parent-School Partnerships for the Department of Education, Science and Training, Robin McKeand of ACER pointed to a review by Sanders & Epstein, which revealed the following:

Children need various sources of support to succeed in schools and in their communities. The research shows that students who receive assistance from the home, family and community are triply benefited and are more likely to be academically successful than those who do not receive the same combination of support.

Teachers and administrators are resistant, at first, to increasing family involvement. Some teachers fear that involving families will decrease their professional status. The benefits of shared decision-making need to be recognized and care taken so that both groups feel empowered instead of deskilled.

Teachers and administrators need education and in-service training. Most educators are unprepared to understand diverse families and work in parent/school partnerships. Further training is important, so that teachers have the knowledge and skills to establish and maintain successful partnerships with parents.

Schools need the input of families and communities. Funding for education cannot meet all requirements. Schools, therefore, need assistance from families and communities to provide varied educational experiences.

Preparing teachers and other educators to build effective links with parents. Developing parent/school partnerships requires a new way of thinking about issues of control, power, conflict resolution with parents, shared decision-making, safety and security on campus and other management issues. Teachers need in-service training that prepares them to communicate with parents effectively and to work with parents on committees.

McKeand posited that successful programmes of parent/school partnerships, regardless of specific student needs, remain largely a function of the vision of individual school Principals and the willingness of teachers to accept additional responsibilities. In so doing, she drew attention to Husen and Postlethwaite's (1994) recommendations for successful parent/school partnerships:

- the provision of in-service training programmes for teachers;
- the establishment of guidelines for appointment of staff to positions of responsibility for home/school liaison;
- the provision of additional staff to allow release of teachers for out-of-class consultation and support activities;
- the employment of ancillary staff with particular skills, such as translators, where necessary.

In Conclusion

The APC believes that research clearly demonstrates that were the reformation of teacher education and in-service to incorporate a central focus on helping teachers to understand the diverse schooling expectations of parents and families, such that new teachers were enabled to communicate equally and effectively with parents, and, teachers were encouraged per se to enter confidently into true partnership with parents, teaching in Australia would reach a new level of professional achievement. That would represent a fantastic outcome for students, parents, teachers, the community at large and the Australia of the future.

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