

# **Family-school partnerships: from action research to sustainable good practice**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Our central input to Australia's education processes is to raise awareness of research findings on the importance of parent engagement and sustainable partnerships between families, schools and their wider community. Because resulting policy statements and directives are alone insufficient to achieve consistent and effective practice, from 2005-2006 we have lead action research to:

- Explore the dynamics of parent engagement in a variety of school communities and how the extent, range and impact of these positive behaviours can be improved;
- Explore in some 300 schools the processes of building effective partnerships between families, schools and their communities with a focus on well-being and coping skills in students, families and the community – providing a supportive and nurturing environment that contributes to students' sense of belonging, self-worth and optimism for the future: essential underpinning for effective learning;
- Work with family-school action teams in 61 case-study schools to explore their experiences and learning in partnership initiatives that reflect the context and dynamics of their diverse communities and circumstances.

The results inform strategies to strengthen these partnerships and to assist an exponentially expanding range of other school communities to establish and sustain effective partnerships as a fundamental element of good education practice.

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# Family-school partnerships: from action research to sustainable good practice

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## 1. Introduction

The central input of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), in conjunction with the Australian Parents Council (APC) over the past decade, has been to raise awareness and build an informed understanding of the implications of international research findings on the importance of parent engagement, and the development of productive sustainable partnerships between families, schools and their wider community.

The foundation point for our work in this field is necessarily the “*Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*”, adopted jointly by Federal, State and Territory Ministers of Education. Sitting as the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training & Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), they provide the highest level of educational policy formulation for Australia.

The Declaration acknowledges the capacity of all young people to learn, and the role of parents as the first educators of their children from the earliest years, and with a complementary role in that learning through the years of formal schooling.

It also acknowledges the role of schooling in developing young people’s learning capacity, and the central role of teachers in that formal learning process.

The Declaration also firmly establishes the breadth and complexity of the scope of the learning and development processes which the years of schooling have a responsibility to nurture and advance:

“Schooling provides a foundation for young Australians’ intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development. By providing a supportive and nurturing environment, schooling contributes to the development of students’ sense of self-worth, enthusiasm for learning and optimism for the future.”

Because our conceptual approach to the scope for effective family-school and community partnerships has always been informed and shaped by the breadth and depth established by the Adelaide Declaration, we have always fully understood the point made by Birte Raven in her opening address at ERNAPE 2005, about the need to take more specific account of the extent to which aspects of the social, emotional, moral and spiritual development of young people have been drawn into the work of the school.

Thus, in terms of the Adelaide Declaration, we have always appreciated that the development of research-based approaches to the formation and maintenance of effective, productive and sustainable family-school and community partnerships, must necessarily encompass all those complementary aspects of learning.

However, when we conducted an initial scoping study, we found that in many cases the issues were being addressed only at the superficial level of physical participation in such structured events as parent-teacher association meetings, working bees, fund raising – a head-count approach to the concept of involvement, as Joyce Epstein noted – and our research figures, like hers, suggested this only takes account of some 20-30% of parents or families. We wholly agree with the conclusion that clearly there is much more to partnership than those simplistic measures so often used as the yardstick in schools.

Most States Education Authorities have separately issued various local policy statements about family-school partnerships. However, when our organisation looked at the results of this a few years ago, it was clear to us that simply issuing policies, guidelines, or even enshrining those aspirations in legislation, does not necessarily produce effective or consistent action in practice. There is a need to build an informed understanding of both the “why” and “how to” of effective family-school and community partnerships and their dynamics in action.

So we have worked with the Federal Minister for Education to seek to elevate this issue to one of national significance, where consistency of approach should be encouraged. While there has been no previous depth of research in this area in Australia or New Zealand, the extensive work done in other countries, particularly in the USA, indicates that family-school partnership seems the logical and necessary way to go to enhance learning and developmental benefits for students. But however desirable, it was evident from international experience that effective and sustainable partnerships do not happen just by themselves, and require a great deal of work to establish and to maintain.

Our background work indicates the barriers to forming and progressing effective partnerships include:

- Parents and teachers don't know about or understand the findings of the literature and the potential benefits
- Parents don't know how they can help, don't feel they have much to offer, or don't feel welcome or encouraged to be involved with the school
- Principals and teachers feel uneasy about involving parents in areas of their professional expertise; and have little training or confidence in working interactively with parents.

## **2. Developing a National Framework for Family-School & Community Partnerships.**

In a “headland” speech in May 2004, “Parents as Partners in School Education”, then federal education minister Hon Dr Brendan Nelson MP announced his commitment to work with ACSSO and APC, inclusively with all stakeholders in education, to develop a National Framework for Family-School and Community Partnerships in Australia. In that speech, he stated: Parents are partners in the schooling of their children and should be treated as such... Parents are saying they want to work together with schools because by doing so they support their children's learning. ... while we all have an interest in a highly educated population, it is the parents who are of course most concerned in seeking their child develop to his or her potential.”

Over a period of several months, through a series of national round-table discussion processes and a long period of community consultation in schools and education bodies in all parts of the country, a provisional draft Framework was developed: in effect, as a “working hypothesis” to

be tested and validated by extensive action research in a range of school communities across the country.

At the centre of the Framework was a conceptual typology of the dimensions of a family-school partnership in action. Taking as its point of departure the “benchmark” and ground-breaking research by Joyce Epstein and her team at Johns Hopkins University, and working through this in terms of the current and emerging Australian and international context, and the existing Adelaide Declaration as its necessary reference point, a seven-point typology was developed through the extensive consultation process, as follows:

- **Communicating**

This dimension emphasizes that effective communication: is a two-way exchange between families and schools; involves not only an exchange of information, but also an opportunity for schools and families to learn about each other; needs to take into account cultural and linguistic diversity and not assume that all families prefer, or are able, to communicate in the same way; is multi-dimensional – it may be: 1) formal or informal, 2) happen in different places (both in the school and in other sites such as community centres), and 3) use different modes (oral, written, face-to-face, phone, email, etc).

Family-school communication needs to be taken seriously –it must be valued, recognised, and rewarded by schools and education systems. It is essential to provide teachers and school leaders with education and training programs to prepare them to communicate effectively with families. It is equally important to empower and encourage families to communicate effectively with schools.

- **Understanding of roles**

As primary educators of their children, parents/carers and families have a lasting influence on their children’s attitudes and achievements at school. They can encourage their children’s learning in and out of school and are also in a position to support school goals, directions and ethos. Parents look to schools to provide secure and caring environments for their children. Families and schools can reach mutual understanding of each other’s roles and priorities in partnerships by:

- exploring the nature of the parent role in the education of their children;
- offering strategies for parents’ support and encouragement of their children’s learning at school;
- organising workshops/discussions/meetings and demonstrations around areas such as literacy and numeracy, home and classroom work, raising resilience and confidence in young people, transitions and careers and so on, depending on local needs and priorities;
- ensuring families understand school goals, curriculum and the social objectives of schooling; and
- ensuring schools understand family, parent and community priorities.

- **Connecting home and school learning**

This dimension involves: families and schools creating positive attitudes to learning in each child; ensuring families are informed about and understand their child’s learning progress; families and schools valuing and using the skills and knowledge children bring from the home to the school and from the school to the home; families and schools recognising and using

literacy and numeracy learning opportunities in the home environment; and parents working with teachers in the educational decision-making process for their individual child.

- **Participating**

Families' time, energy and expertise can support learning and school programmes in many ways. This may involve family members: working with students on learning activities in classrooms, participating in other school activities outside the classroom, or participating in activities outside the school itself. Families participate in the school in a wide variety of ways and all contributions are valuable.

- **Sharing Decision-making**

Parents can play meaningful roles in the school decision-making processes. Training and information to make the most of those opportunities can be conducted as part of the partnership programmes and processes of the school. An inclusive approach to school decision-making and parental involvement creates a sense of shared responsibility among parents, community members, teachers and administrators. In turn, shared responsibility:

- ensures that parents' values and interests are heard and respected, and
- makes the school more accountable to its community.

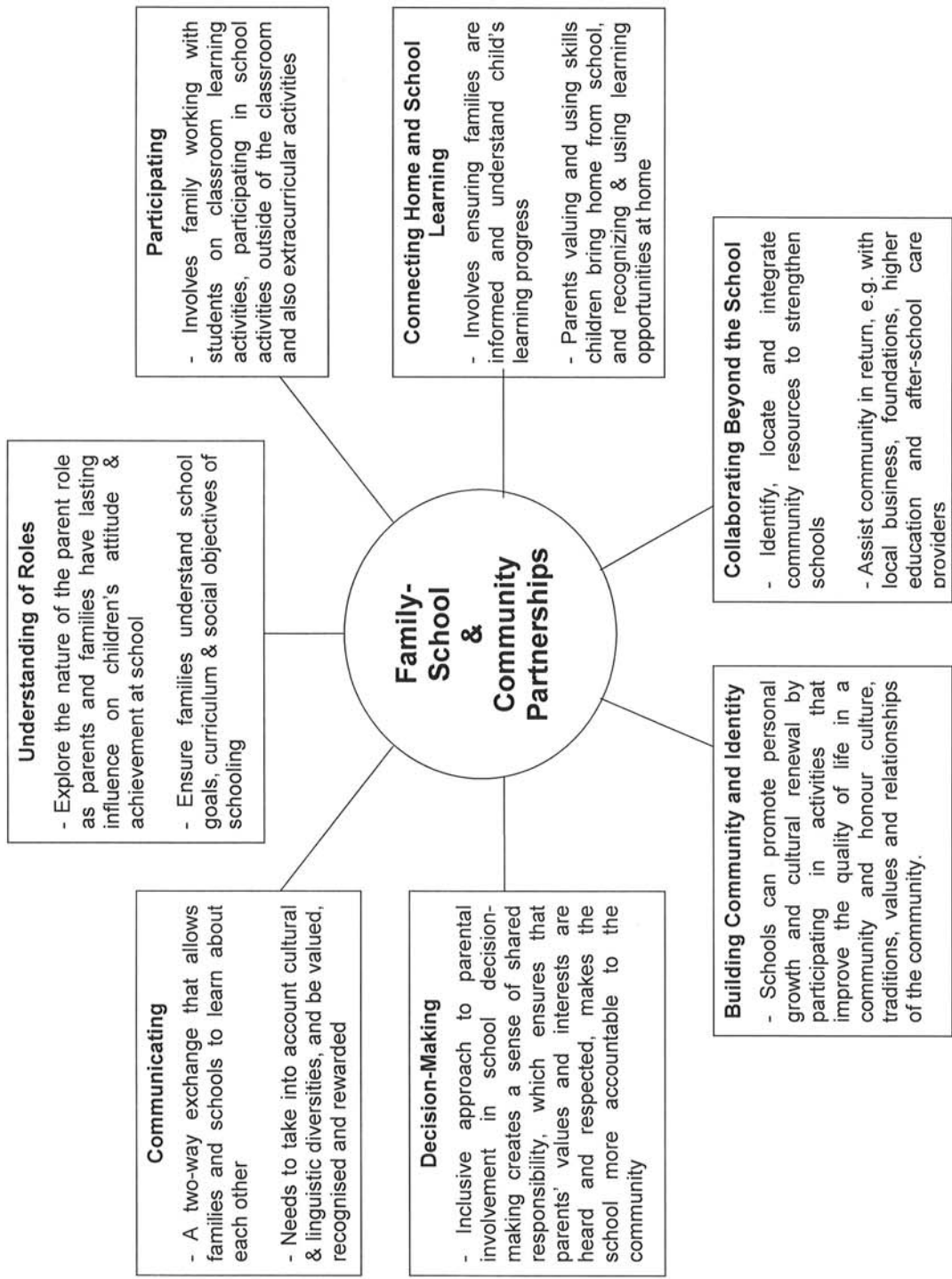
- **Collaborating beyond the school**

This dimension involves identifying, locating and integrating community resources. The wider community provides services to strengthen and support schools, students and their families. Schools, families and students can assist the community in return. Schools are increasingly relying on collaborative efforts with partners such as:

- local businesses,
- after-school care providers,
- higher education,
- foundations, and
- other community-based agencies.

- **Building community and identity**

This refers to activities that improve the quality of life in a community while honouring the culture, traditions, values and relationships in that community. By including activities that shape students' sense of identity and culture, schools can build a sense of community in each student. This dimension importantly includes the moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions explicitly recognised in the Adelaide Declaration. Thus schools have a role to play in promoting both personal growth and cultural renewal.



### 3. Validating the Framework through action research in school communities 2005-2006

In 2005 the Minister jointly commissioned ACSSO and APC to coordinate a major national action research project to test and validate the elements of the Framework document in a wide-ranging sample of 61 schools, 41 from the public sector and 20 from across the non-government sector, from all parts of the country. In selecting the schools, every effort was made to include as wide a cross-section as possible from across all States and Territories, to provide a range of small, medium and large schools, from capital cities, regional towns, and rural or remote country areas. School communities also demonstrated a wide range of factors and characteristics, including variations of socioeconomic and multicultural dynamics, including two isolated schools in indigenous communities, one on a Torres Strait island, and the other in remote central Australia.

ACSSO and APC had an active leading role in the invitation and selection process of these schools, and maintained close liaison throughout the project with each of these schools and their local Project Leadership Team, and also worked closely at all stages with the independent Consultants whom we engaged for the purpose, Denis Muller & Associates, with input to the final Report on the successful outcomes of the project.

In the selection process, ACSSO and APC personally contacted school leaders in a range of schools which through the other processes had indicated a strong interest in developing or strengthening family-school and community partnerships. Many of these were active participants in the processes of a parallel initiative developed and co-ordinated by ACSSO and APC, called “Families Matter” – aimed at engaging parents to work participatively with schools on processes to support well-being, resiliency and social and emotional health in young people’s personal development. Most of those “Families Matter” schools had established and developed a sound practicum in the formation and operation of a joint Project Management Team in their schools, and saw the value of widening the scope of their Team across the elements of the Partnership Framework in action.

(It is worth noting, in terms of the links with Families Matter, and the complementary fit between these initiatives, that the national evaluation of that parallel initiative concluded that:

- *Families Matter gives parents a means of coming together and discussing issues about the raising and educating of children in a way that adds to their own coping and parenting skills. It does this, moreover, by allowing parents to decide what it is they want to talk about, and how they want to talk about it;*
- *Families Matter creates a vehicle for partnerships between families and schools. It is prized by principals and school staff for this quality;*
- *Families Matter gives some parents new self-confidence and contributes to their personal development.)*

One hundred schools were invited to submit and outline proposal, and from these the final 61 recommendations were put to the Minister and approved for seed funding to support the operation of their joint Project Management Team. A detailed 12-18 month project plan was agreed by each participant school in consultation with the project consultants, including the assembly of baseline data, outcomes and performance measures, milestones and reporting points and format.

#### 4. Findings and Recommendations

A final report was submitted to the Minister latter 2006. The final published Report is available online and is referenced below. The Report is of particular value in two particular aspects. Firstly, it includes a total of twelve case studies which were drawn from a greater range fully documented in the project, and each of these was chosen to bring out particular aspects of effective and innovative approaches in a variety of community contexts and settings. Secondly, by design, the scope of the findings and recommendations extended well beyond simply documenting the extent to which and ways in which the provisional Family-School and Community Partnerships Framework was effective in action and where it might require revision or amendment – but to consider more broadly the dynamics of family-school and community partnerships in action or in evolution.

It is worth quoting here briefly a few leading issues highlighted in the findings and recommendations (see pp 14-26 of the published Report:

*“This action research project demonstrates that partnerships between families and schools can:*

- *Improve educational outcomes for students;*
- *Contribute to the building of social capital in the community;*
- *Positively alter school culture;*
- *Stimulate self-growth among parents; and*
- *Enhance the professional rewards for principals and school staff.*

*These are significant educational and social gains. They demonstrate the value of the family school partnership ideal and provide strong grounds for adopting and promoting the concept as widely as possible.*

*“A survey of parents conducted as part of this study found that large majorities said that their involvement in their school’s partnership project had:*

- *Led to their knowing more about the kinds of activities going on in the school generally*
- *Led to their knowing more about what their children were being taught in school, and*
- *Been good for their children’s education (69%).*

*These are strong findings which demonstrate clearly the benefits to parents and to the educational well-being of children that arose from these partnership projects.*

*“Valuable though the partnership ideal is, it requires considerable cultural change. There is a need for principals and teachers to readily acknowledge and appreciate the role of the parents, not only as “first educators” but as “continuing educators”, and to see a place for them in the educational life of the school. There is a need for parents to recognise and appreciate the power and importance of their educative role, and to see the value of the attributes they can bring to the education process.*

*“For many people this means looking at the school-home relationship in an entirely new light. This will not happen overnight. It means changing many decades of attitudes and beliefs about who is responsible for what in the raising of children. This will take time, effort and considerable awareness-raising among parents and professionals alike.*

*It has also profound implications for the training of teachers and for the selection of principals. The necessary cultural change requires significant attention being paid both in the*

*academy and in the bureaucracy to the role of the parent and how it interacts with the role of the professional educator.*

*Developing parent-school partnerships requires a new way of thinking about issues of control and power, and creative thinking about reaching out to those who are or feel excluded. This is a particular priority in Indigenous settings where alienation from schooling can be widespread among parents. Some schools are further along the path of recognising these requirements than are others, and schools take many different approaches to making partnerships real. These approaches are informed by the school's own circumstances: its history, the outlook and commitment of the Principal, the economic, social and geographical conditions of its community. In Indigenous settings, the introduction of Aboriginal Education Workers (or those with equivalent titles and functions in the various States), or of Indigenous parents into active roles in the school have been shown to be effective ways of creating a sense of cultural inclusiveness.*

*“In nearly all cases, the original impetus for the partnership projects seen in this research came from the school. This is because parents generally expect schools to take the initiative in these matters, and because the school is in a position to see more broadly the overall needs of children than can individual families.*

*“Even where the impetus came from the parents, they tended to be respectful of the school's educational expertise. This does not imply deference. If parents feel strongly enough about an issue, they will press their case resolutely but in the main parents will need strong reasons to argue with the school over educational or child-management issues. The good Principal will nurture this parental strength in schools where there is a culture of parental engagement. Where the impetus has come from the parents, the focus of the project has tended to be more on social issues than educational.*

*“There are cases all through this study – including the Best Practice cases – where the school has driven the project: identified a problem, proposed a solution, and implemented it while at the same time engendering a sense of partnership, in some cases where no such sense ever existed before and did not necessarily do so at the outset. It is perhaps to be expected that the impetus should come from the school, but this does not prevent a true partnership from developing. The sense of partnership can grow with the project: it needn't start as a 50-50 arrangement.*

*“Parents react best when they can see there is a connection between their involvement in the school and their own child's education. Bringing parents into the school's life, asking their opinion, exposing them to the ways schools work, can have a positive effect on the attitude of some parents to the school when that attitude has been hostile. Hostility often springs from a sense of having been excluded, or intimidated or being fobbed off or kept in the dark. There were several cases here, including case study A, where an inclusive approach defused what had been in the past a dangerously hostile environment.*

*“What constitutes a family-school partnership ought not to be reduced to a doctrinaire definition.*

*What makes a partnership can and should vary from school to school. Few projects among the 61 in this study sprang originally from the minds of parents, or jointly from the minds of parents and staff, but this does not, in our view, rob them of the “partnership” characteristic. What makes them partnerships is the presence of five key characteristics:*

1. *The school leadership's willingness to consult and listen;*
2. *Their willingness to be responsive;*
3. *Their willingness to be welcoming;*
4. *Their willingness to find out the real needs of parents rather than make assumptions;*
5. *Their efforts to nurture an open, inclusive culture.*

*“We also distilled elements of best practice. These do not amount to a checklist because not all will be present in any one partnership, but they reflect to a considerable extent the key dimensions in the draft framework, as the table below shows. However, there are elements of best practice that seem not to fit easily into the key dimensions. They are:*

- *Be a venue for, and agent of, parental self-growth;*
- *Be sensitive to parents' sensibilities;*
- *Show leadership, be visible and available;*
- *Be realistic, patient, and a bit brave; and*
- *Create a place that parents can call their own.*

*“The school Principal is the single most important factor in achieving best practice. Where the Principal is visionary, perceptive, creative, committed, open, patient and capable of leading with humility and humanity, the partnership ideal flourishes. These paragons exist. They are there in the 12 case studies and in many other schools besides. Their secret appears to be a capacity to empower others; to recognise that good ideas can come from others; to be able to empathise with others, especially people in hardship or difficulty, and to do all this without losing their natural authority. Genuine leadership, in other words.*

*“A recurring feature of the best of these partnerships projects was that they brought into the school parents who were not usually involved.*

And, indeed, the action research validated all seven key elements of the core typology. It is of particular interest that while all parties to the process reacted very positively to all seven aspects as being appropriate and directly relevant, there was general agreement that two above all are essentially important to be recognised and given particular focus in building an effective partnership:

- Communication
- Building Community and Personal Identity

The action research also validated the other no less important elements of the Framework.

## **5. Next Steps to Support National Implementation of the Framework**

Because of a change in Minister and the emergence of other educational priorities given higher profile by the current Administration, there has been some delay over recent months in progressing these important further. However, as a result of more recent discussions, the project is now back on course, and will shortly be progressed through the following key steps:

- Endorsement by the Ministerial Committee on Education (MCEETYA) as the national Australian standard and blueprint to guide the formation and development of Family-School and Community Partnerships.

- Publication, launch and distribution to all schools in the country of the endorsed Framework together with a range of supporting information drawn from the action research, including the Case Studies of innovative and effective practice.
- Commissioning ACSSO and APC jointly to establish a national Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau to provide training, mentoring and ongoing support to schools already under way or seeking to establish, develop or extend effective and productive family-school partnerships in their community.

## 6. Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau

The Bureau will consolidate, build upon and extend the range of work which ACSSO and APC have done in the course of a range of project activities over the past years and into the present time, through this present project and the parallel initiative “Families Matter”: with a particular focus on the learnings and benefits of the Family-School Partnerships initiative.

The purpose of the Bureau is to maximise learning, participation, reflective practice, community impact and community benefits. It will build upon the positive results that have been achieved in the 61 action research schools, and to facilitate the replication or adaptation by other schools of the successful initiatives, in ways that suit the context and circumstances of their local community.

The Bureau’s operation would provide these facilities to school communities:

- Support, help desk and advisory services
- Provide both financial and project management support for the related **Families Reading Together** initiative which is currently under development
- Provide information and a range of resources through printed and electronic publications
- Link into research and information from around the world, disseminate findings and learnings and promote access to good practice approaches internationally
- Develop and deliver training and workshops
- Publicise and develop awareness of good practice models and innovative approaches in operation around the country
- Facilitate information sharing between and among schools in local clusters, regional areas and those widely dispersed across the country
- Action research to extend our understanding of the dynamics, nature, operation and benefits of effective partnerships and the ways in which parents and families engage.

Key areas of immediate activity will include:

- Maintaining facilitation linkages with the 61 “demonstration” schools to assist them to embed effective and sustainable partnership processes as a fundamental part of their

operation into the future – documented in their evolving case studies and their exemplary and advisory role as “centres of excellence”

- Working closely with additional school communities, to enable them to learn from, replicate and adapt such strategies to meet the needs of their own community context and circumstances
- Development and maintenance of an appropriate range of learning materials, including in particular the revised Families Matter partnership processes, which were used by a significant number of the 61 case study schools as their enabling vehicle to engage and involve parents and the community
- Maintaining and developing the existing extensive Website resources as an expanding source and “clearing house” of relevant current information on research and effective practice in Australia and overseas
- Providing a range of opportunities for further schools to post their own case studies, to extend the range of learnings and action strategies and their experiential development in all possible local situations, to assist other schools in undertaking their own journey.
- Setting up an expanding range of interactive facilities, to develop conversations between practitioners and between interested parties in school communities right across the country, building a living and evolving interconnected network of reflective practice.
- Building connections with other complementary initiatives around the country, e.g. the Festival for Healthy Living initiative in Victoria and its active school clusters across that State, building the synergies and positive interaction between these activities
- Developing and publishing research, discussion and information papers in language (and in community languages) suited to the needs and expectations of parents and families across the country, building and reinforcing their understanding, engagement and ownership of the issues and practices around well-being, resiliency and positive personal and academic development of young people in all communities.

## **7. Final Comments**

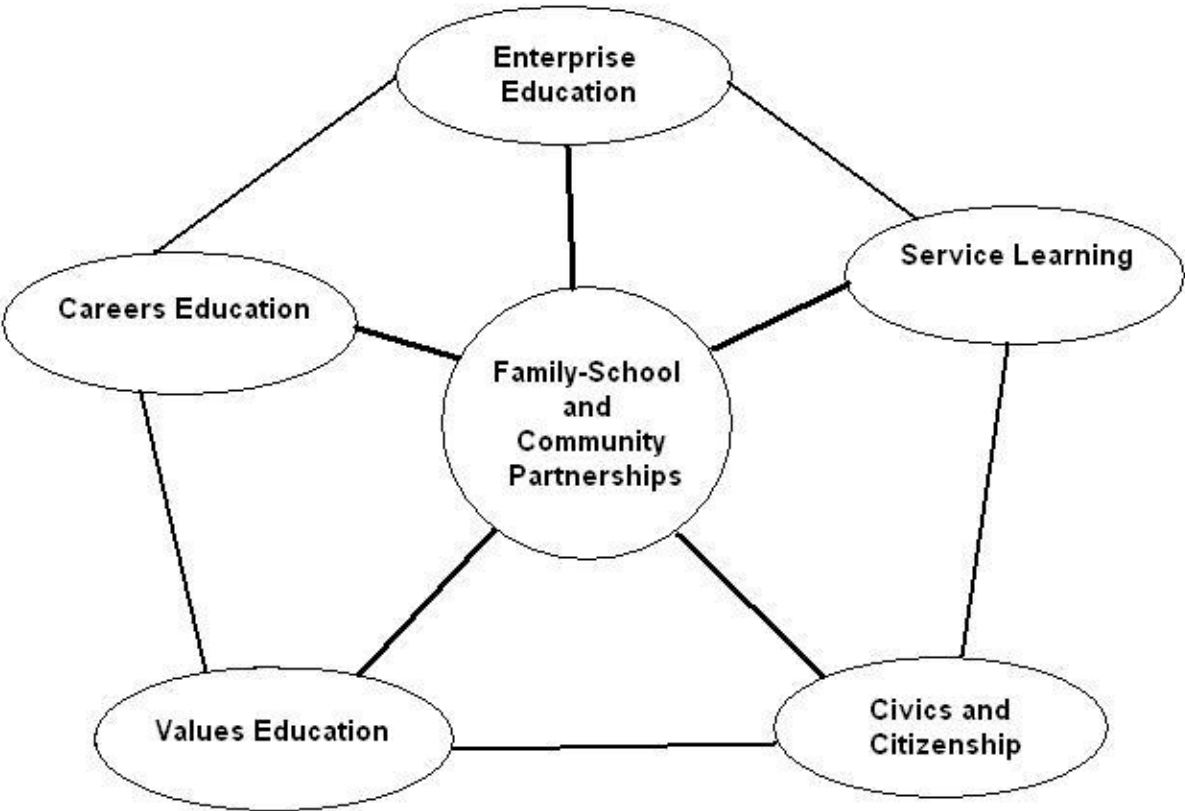
Through the enabling support and commitment of successive federal Ministers of Education, ACSSO (in conjunction with APC) has worked progressively over the past five years to raise awareness and build an informed understanding of the implications of international research findings on the importance of parent engagement, and the development of productive sustainable partnerships between families, schools and their wider community.

By means of that work, there is now a much better and more strategically focused understanding of the benefits of effective partnerships, and of the dynamics of such effective and sustainable partnerships in action in a wide variety of settings.

This also establishes a clearer understanding of the fundamental importance of effective and sustainable family-school and community partnerships as the context and driver of effective

Values Education in schools and the integrating mechanism which synergises a number of elements of learning and personal development which otherwise may be perceived and undertaken – less effectively - as discrete or unrelated activities (e.g. Service-Learning, Enterprise Education, Careers Education, etc – see figure 2)

Through the imminent decision by MCEETYA, the distribution of enabling materials to all school communities, and the establishment and operation of the Family-School and Community Partnership Bureau, we are now in a very sound position to enable other school communities in all parts of the country to share in those learnings and gain the opportunity and support to develop effective family-school and community partnerships, for the benefit of all young Australians.



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