

**Partners in Learning:  
Parents' Voices  
September 2008**

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## Introduction

The extent to which schools engage with everyone in their community, not just those already involved and engaged, is the focus of this study. This report presents the views of parents from diverse communities about their involvement with their children's schools. It discusses their expectations, what worked well for them and what made engagement difficult, and it includes their ideas about what schools could do to strengthen engagement. This report complements the evaluation reports: *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities, June 2008* and *Partners in Learning: Good Practice, September 2008*.

The composition of individual school communities in New Zealand reflects the changes taking place in the wider community. Schools with widely diverse communities, and those that are undergoing significant change, face opportunities and challenges about how best to involve parents and whānau in developing mutually supportive learning relationships with and for students.

The Ministry of Education's publication *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)* defines diversity from a student perspective as follows:

*Diversity encompasses many characteristics including ethnicity, socio-economic background, home language, gender, special needs, disability, and giftedness. Teaching needs to be responsive to diversity within ethnic groups, for example, diversity within Pākehā, Māori, Pasifika and Asian students.<sup>1</sup>*

ERO found, overwhelmingly, that all parents expect the best education for their children regardless of their background or where they choose to have their child educated. Parents have high expectations of schools and particularly of teachers. They want to be involved with schools and they want schools and teachers to engage and support their child to achieve success, not just academically, but in other ways as well.

Engagement works well when relationships between parents and the people at the school are developed and nurtured in ways that respect diversity. Parents appreciate regular communication that is both formal and informal. They like positive feedback about their child but they also want to know sooner rather than later if there are concerns about learning or well-being. Home-school partnerships are strengthened when parents have opportunities to share in their child's successes and to help their child with learning activities at home.

During this evaluation parents told ERO about the factors that make engagement with their child's school difficult. These included poor communication and school practices that did not include or respect the diverse groups that make up each school's community. When expectations between parents and the school were not clearly

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<sup>1</sup> Alton-Lee, Adrienne. *Best evidence synthesis: Quality teaching for diverse students in schooling*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2003.

defined this created barriers to the development of partnerships focused on children's learning and well-being.

Parents and whānau identified ways that schools could improve engagement. The need for better forms of communication and support emerges as a key issue for parents. Many parents' comments were about improving their relationships with their children's teachers, and their concerns about the quality of their child's relationship with his or her teacher. ERO found that the development of shared understandings and expectations between home and school is crucial to successful engagement.

This report discusses expectations, relationships, communication, learning partnerships and getting involved in schools and presents an overview of the findings from each of the parent groups ERO met with, in relation to:

- what parents expect of schools;
- what parents think schools expect of them;
- what works well;
- what makes engagement difficult; and
- what would help improve engagement between home and school.

## Methodology

ERO's findings are based on information from 34 discussion groups and 55 parent questionnaires. The discussion groups, attended by 235 parents, were held with specific communities including parents of Māori, Pacific, special needs, refugee, migrant, remote, and transient children. The purpose of the discussion groups was to listen to what parents had to say about engaging with their children's schools, of the benefits and value of partnerships with these schools, and the challenges to effective engagement. ERO review officers organised and facilitated these discussion groups.

The questionnaire (available in English and te reo Māori) was completed by parents either in hard copy or through ERO's website. The responses gave ERO information about:

- parents' involvement in general school activities;
- perceived barriers to parent involvement;
- the ways in which parents found out about their child's learning;
- the usefulness, timeliness and value of information provided by the school; and
- parents' perceptions (opinions and experiences) of their engagement.

Questionnaires completed by parents and whānau who stated their ethnicity as Māori, Pacific or Chinese were analysed separately for the purposes of this report. Some respondents with primary or intermediate children provided responses in te reo Māori.

Parent perspectives in this evaluation came from those who were able and willing to attend meetings or complete a questionnaire.

The appendices of the main evaluation report *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*, June 2008, include a statistical breakdown of the parents involved in the discussion groups and those who completed the questionnaire.

## Findings

### ***Engagement with schools: what parents and whānau told ERO***

This evaluation sought to find out about home-school engagement from the perspective of parents. ERO asked parents and whānau for their views in order to understand their expectations of schools, what made engagement work well, what made it difficult, and what schools could do to improve. The findings are organised under the following groups of parents:

- Māori parents and whānau;
- Pacific parents;
- refugee and migrant parents;
- parents of children with special needs; and
- other groups.

### ***Māori parents and whānau***

#### **What did parents expect of schools?**

Māori parents and whānau told ERO that their children and mokopuna were their priority and involvement in their education was critical. They expected teachers to have a range of skills and strategies to engage their children in learning. Māori parents expected schools to give them honest, accurate and useful information about their child's progress and achievement. They wanted their children to become confident learners who accepted challenges and maintained their personal mana.

Māori parents said they wanted to be involved in their child's school, be invited to come to school and be part of their child's learning. They wanted their culture and values acknowledged through the use of Māori protocols, for example mihi and karakia at meetings. They also expected schools to provide programmes in te reo Māori and tikanga that supported their children's learning.

#### **What did they think schools expected of them?**

Māori parents and whānau believed that schools expected them to support systems, expectations and procedures for attendance and behaviour management, and to follow protocols for visiting classrooms and teachers. They also thought schools expected them to attend school hui and support their children with homework.

#### **What worked well?**

Māori parents wanted their children to have good learning relationships with their teacher(s). They thought that this was more likely to happen when teachers related well to their students, respecting and acknowledging their cultural identity. Māori parents and whānau appreciated opportunities to celebrate their child's success and to have discussions about what and how well they were learning. Seeing their child progress over time was very important to them. Engagement worked well when, as parents, they were listened to and their ideas were valued.

These parents said having Māori trustees on the board helped them to engage with their child's school. They also noted that it was often easier for the Māori perspective to be heard if there was more than one Māori trustee. Whānau groups for support, and

opportunities for discussion about their child's learning and well-being were also seen as very important.

### **What made engagement difficult?**

Certain factors hindered successful engagement with Māori parents. Teachers who held negative or deficit views and attitudes about their children were of particular concern to parents. Some parents believed that their children would have to battle these views and attitudes throughout their schooling.

Māori parents said that it was difficult to work in partnership when report interviews were rushed and teachers were not always well prepared. Some had concerns about not being well informed when their child had difficulties with learning.

Māori parents noted that it was not easy to work in partnership with their child's school when policies and procedures were not made available to them or the information was not clearly stated. In particular, they said it was difficult when schools did not have processes for parents to raise concerns about their child if these occurred. Some parents gave examples of schools not responding to concerns or complaints in an appropriate and timely manner, leading to frustration and a breakdown of relationships.

Other factors that made engagement difficult related to Māori parents' own experience of school. Where parents had had negative experiences in their own schooling they found it more difficult to get involved with their child's learning. Additional barriers cited by these parents included not having time to go on trips, and not having money to support additional activities such as camps.

### **What would help?**

Māori parents thought that schools could do a variety of things to improve engagement with them. Having a receptive principal (and senior management team) who actively listened to what they had to say was of prime importance. They felt that schools that were genuinely welcoming to Māori made it easier for them to have contact with their child's teacher. Hui and consultation activities offering different ways for parents to express their views and give feedback were seen as likely to increase levels of engagement.

Māori parents told ERO that they wanted teachers to encourage and take a lead in involving them, through actions and not just words. They appreciated getting reports about their child's progress and achievements that were honest and gave them a lead as to what should be learnt next. They liked being involved in helping their child set learning goals.

Many Māori parents saw homework as a way of strengthening home-school partnerships. Parents thought that clearer expectations about what was expected of their child's homework would help them to understand its purpose and the level of involvement they should have.

Māori parents said that the use of different ways to communicate, such as text messaging and email, would help the flow of information between home and school.

Having a Māori support group in the school and the backing of kaumatua could also help strengthen engagement. Parents noted that partnerships could be strengthened if all schools offered dual language learning opportunities.

### ***Pacific parents/families***

#### **What did parents expect of schools?**

Pacific parents wanted their children to have a good education that involved them as their children's first teachers. They saw the home as providing their child with a strong foundation that included maintaining their first language. Therefore, Pacific parents said, they wanted schools to help their children learn English. They expected schools to give their child homework, and that through homework parents would support and learn with their child. They expected communication to be regular and timely and they expected to be consulted on a range of matters.

#### **What did they think schools expected of them?**

Pacific parents told ERO they thought schools expected their full support in activities, including running cultural groups. Although they believed schools expected them to help with their child's homework, they were not always comfortable helping their child with academic studies.

#### **What worked well?**

For Pacific parents face-to-face communication was an important part of personalising engagement. These parents found having newsletters translated into their first language and posted to them was a good way of informing them about what was happening in the school. For some parents, having Pacific representation on the board of trustees was beneficial because it gave them a voice in the wider functioning of the school. Their involvement in cultural groups and festivals in the school and the wider community helped to build confidence and a sense of belonging.

Opportunities to be involved in celebrations, particularly those acknowledging a range of achievements for their children and not just academic success, strengthened their relationship with their children and with teachers.

Parent support group meetings offered a forum to discuss common interests, issues and ways to help their children with learning at home. Some Pacific parents found the experience of being involved in formal home-school partnership programmes, especially those focused on literacy and numeracy, very positive. They noted that engagement worked best when their child's culture was acknowledged and respected.

#### **What made engagement difficult?**

Language and communication were challenges to effective engagement for Pacific parents. Parents told ERO that they were not always confident speaking in English and, sometimes, did not understand the jargon used by teachers.

These parents found it hard when the principal or teacher contacted them only when their child did something wrong. This was not made any easier when they saw teachers involved in negative interactions with their children. Pacific parents were particularly anxious if they felt that schools were not welcoming to them. Such experiences made it more difficult for them to visit the school and talk to their child's teacher or other staff when issues arose.



Some Pacific parents were reluctant to go to meetings at their child's school, particularly when their ethnicity was not acknowledged. A parent, for example, had the experience of being told to join with another ethnic group after not having her specific culture acknowledged at a meeting. She did not return to another meeting at the school after that experience. Some parents who did not find it easy to go to school meetings suggested that schools try holding meetings with Pacific parents in other well-established Pacific community venues where possible. Some Pacific parents who had work commitments in the afternoons and evenings found it difficult to attend events and meetings.

Financial costs for such things as uniforms and education outside the classroom activities created additional barriers to their children's participation in some activities.

### **What would help?**

Pacific parents told ERO they would like to be contacted more often about their child's positive achievements. Pacific parents said they would like to be informed about celebrations of their child's achievement, especially when their child was receiving an award or certificate at assembly.

Pacific parents expected honest reporting about their child's progress and achievement. They also wanted to be contacted sooner rather than later when concerns or issues arose regarding their children's education or well-being.

Some parents commented that having a homework centre at their child's school built their own confidence in helping with their child with learning. Parents found information meetings useful, for example meetings about assessment systems such as those about the National Certificates of Educational Achievement.

It helped these parents when the school had an appropriate staff member as a key contact or liaison person for Pacific families. Some parents also thought that having a senior manager (particularly in secondary schools) responsible for improving educational outcomes for Pacific students helped them feel that their children's learning was seen as a priority.

Pacific parents believed that it was important that school staff, particularly teachers, had some understanding about working with Pacific families. Where this was lacking, they thought teachers could be supported by some relevant training from Pacific organisations. Where teachers had an understanding of the different Pacific ethnicities and values it was easier for Pacific parents to develop relationships with the school.

Some schools organised meetings for groups of parents based on their ethnicity. When these meetings were well managed, parents found them a good way of getting to know other parents in the community, and as a forum for discussing school-related matters and sharing ideas of common interest.

A parent at one of the discussion groups referred to Pacific families' engagement in schools as bringing families and schools together for the benefit of the child: *"It is like a bird needing two strong wings to fly."*

## ***Refugee and migrant (Immigrant) parents***

### **What did parents expect of schools?**

Parents who had immigrated to New Zealand had high expectations for their children's learning and high expectations of the schools their children attended. Refugee and migrant parent groups who spoke to ERO saw education as very important, and expected that schools would support their child to learn and achieve well, alongside other children. They wanted their child to be treated as an equal in the New Zealand education system.

Immigrant parents expected teachers to be proactive in developing relationships with them and learning about their cultural backgrounds. They wanted to be valued for the contribution they could make to their children's learning and to the school. In some regions a lot of work to build relationships has been undertaken by leaders in the refugee community, rather than by schools. Many of the parents who spoke to ERO expressed their belief that New Zealand schools were not good at working with diverse communities.

### **What did they think schools expected of them?**

Immigrant parents were less sure about what the schools expected of them. Some knew that schools expected them to send their child to school with lunch and ready to learn. Others thought that some schools had very low expectations about the level of engagement with them as parents.

### **What worked well?**

Immigrant parents appreciated being asked to help out. Helping with activities such as school trips and supervising activities such as school patrols enabled these parents to spend more time at the school and to get to know other parents.

These parents said they expected to be contacted by school staff as soon as problems or concerns about their child arose, not when things had escalated. Although they valued all forms of communication, this was most effective when information was translated or there were interpreters available for face-to-face meetings.

Refugee and migrant parents sought information, and appreciated being informed about what was happening at their child's school and about knowing how they could be involved. Where boards of trustees made provision for employing a liaison officer or volunteer interpreters, this helped them overcome language barriers.

### **What made engagement difficult?**

Refugee and migrant parents' biggest concerns were about developing effective communication with schools. Limited forms of communication and processes that did not take account of language and culture hindered effective engagement. Where parents had difficulty getting someone to interpret for them, this sometimes compounded the difficulties for these families.

Confusion about their child's class level placements and receiving 'too little' information about their child's learning 'too late' were also barriers to positive engagement.

Immigrant parents were not always clear about school expectations for homework. They sometimes found it difficult to help their children with homework because of language barriers or because they did not understand how aspects of the curriculum were taught in New Zealand.

### **What would help?**

These parents thought that it would be helpful for schools, particularly secondary schools, to have staff with a designated liaison role who they could approach for help when they had concerns. They believe that this would be a way of improving engagement and making it easier for them to come into their child's school and access information.

The use of a variety of communication strategies works well for immigrant parents. They valued telephone contact, the use of home-school communication notebooks and more formal letters, where appropriate. It helped parents when their child 'acted as a courier' bringing relevant information home and talking with their parents about what was happening at school. For some parents, having information translated into their first language helped them, as did access to interpreters at meetings.

Parents wanted schools to talk to them more regularly about their child's learning. They particularly liked personalised teacher comments. Some sought more homework believing that this helped to strengthen their relationship with their child's teacher.

Having opportunities to meet together helped parents to get to know other parents in similar situations. These occasions provided a forum to discuss common areas of interest or concern. Such meetings needed to be non-threatening social events that respected and acknowledged cultural backgrounds and expectations.

Immigrant parents spoke about teachers' valuing and understanding the importance of their languages and their cultural protocols. They suggested that schools could help teachers increase their understanding about working with migrant and refugee families by inviting people to give them training in some of these aspects. Schools needed to be open to their community and view parents as having a lot to offer to the school.

### ***Parents of children with special needs***

#### **What did parents expect of schools?**

Parents of children with special needs expected that their child (and family) would be valued as part of the school community and treated with respect. They wanted their relationships with school personnel to be based on empathy and mutual respect. Parents expected schools to welcome their child for his or her difference. They felt that engagement was enhanced when staff were approachable, accessible, and interested in them and their child.

Parents also expected to work in partnership with their child's school and to be involved in solutions to problems, rather than being blamed for things that happened. For them, working in partnership meant sharing responsibility for their child's learning and well-being.

### **What did they think schools expected of them?**

Parents of children with special needs were often not so clear about what schools expected of them. Some thought schools expected them to be responsible for their child's behaviour at home and at school. Parents said they were sometimes confused by messages they received from schools about their roles and those of the school. This was particularly so in regard to their child's learning and well-being. They believed that some schools really wanted to have only "intelligent and well-behaved" children and, if this was not so, they should consider enrolling their child elsewhere.

### **What worked well?**

Regular and constructive communication that kept parents 'in the loop' was considered useful. Parents of children with special needs liked being contacted with positive messages about their child and not just when things were not going so well. Positive conversations about their child, both formal and informal, helped to strengthen partnerships.

Opportunities for these parents to learn and be supported in working with their child increased their confidence and helped them to have good relationships at home.

Engagement also worked well when schools tapped into parents' skills, talents and expertise. It was important that teachers trusted them as parents for the knowledge they had about their child. Having teachers who believed in their child's potential was critical to successful and sustainable learning partnerships.

### **What made engagement difficult?**

Parents of children with special needs found that some schools were not open to working with them, and they felt that they were unwelcome. They struggled with entrenched attitudes by some school staff about their child and his or her learning or behavioural needs. For some parents, labelling their child and themselves, sometimes linked to previous family history with the school, undermined the development of constructive relationships.

Some schools only contacted parents when there was a crisis and often when it was too late to resolve things easily. Parents believed that because of their child's special needs they were expected to be at the school's 'beck and call' to come and supervise their child or take him or her home when things got difficult. They were often left feeling rejected and misunderstood by other parents and children.

Some parents had difficulty getting information about funding and support for their child. They commented that, in some schools, a lack of transparency about funding created a barrier to their positive engagement.

Many families with a special needs child said they found coping on a day-to-day basis stressful. Without adequate support from their child's school, they did not have the energy to get involved in wider school activities.

### **What would help?**

Being part of an inclusive school community where difference was accepted was a key factor supporting parent engagement. When their initial contact with their child's school was welcoming and reassuring, it was easier for parents to feel comfortable about coming to school. Parents of children with special needs told ERO that they felt

good school leadership made the difference in how effectively they and their child engaged with the school.

Supportive interpersonal relationships that were maintained and strengthened through good communication, particularly with their child's teacher, helped to foster good quality partnerships. Teachers who were willing to actively learn about their child's special needs were better able to adapt programmes to suit the child.

Parents of children with special needs appreciated having their views about their child listened to, and having ongoing opportunities to discuss their child's progress and achievement. They believed it helped when programmes were well matched to their child's needs and any homework given was appropriate to their child's abilities. Learning partnerships were strengthened when parents were able to work with the school for the benefit of their child.

Parents said that having someone in the school with whom they could talk about concerns or questions they might have made a difference. They also valued having opportunities to meet and talk with other parents of children with special needs. It helped them make these contacts if schools facilitated these opportunities.

### ***Other groups of parents***

As well as the particular groups mentioned above, ERO sought and received views about engagement with schooling from many other parents.

### **What did parents expect of schools?**

Parents told ERO they expected teachers to be well trained and the school to be an open and welcoming place. They expected schools to keep them well informed about their child's achievement and to do this through a variety of means, including regular face-to-face contact, formally in writing and through the use of information and communication technologies such as email and the use of an interactive and up-to-date school website.

Parents wanted to know about homework expectations so they could give their child the most appropriate support. They wanted information about curriculum and how their child's learning was assessed. Parents expected the school to contact them promptly if there were concerns about their child.

### **What did they think schools expected of them?**

There were varying views about this. Some thought that schools did not expect them to be involved and others thought schools expected a lot of them. The latter group believed that primary schools expected more engagement than secondary schools and that all schools expected a lot in terms of parent involvement in fundraising.

### **What worked well?**

Parents talked about being proactive and letting their child's teacher(s) know that they were interested and wanted to be involved. They liked it when they could pop into school and chat with their child's teacher before or after school. Getting incidental feedback about positive aspects of their child's learning was as important as the more formal reporting activities. Parents found it useful when reports gave them good personalised feedback on their child's learning. Student portfolios were seen as a useful complement to the more traditional teacher interviews and written reports.

Other positive experiences included attending school assemblies, (these were non-threatening enjoyable events), helping with their child's homework when expectations were clear and well understood, and teachers attending community events where they could get to know them outside the school environment.

### **What made engagement difficult?**

Engagement was difficult for parents when communication from the schools was irregular and impersonal. Parents identified barriers to good engagement that related to getting good information about their child's progress and achievement. They found the short timeframe available for interviews with teachers did not allow adequate time for meaningful discussion. Parents said that bland, uninformative reports did not give them any idea of whether their child was making suitable progress or what the next steps in the child's learning might be. They also found the jargon used by teachers in reports hard to understand.

Frequent changes in school personnel made it hard for parents to work in partnership with their child's school. The situation was compounded when there was a lack of community support for the school.

Some parents believed that the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, made it difficult to know what to do when issues arose. They mentioned, in particular, how to raise concerns or make complaints and the school's discipline policies and procedures.

Other barriers related to the busy lives parents led and the effect this had on the time they had available to get involved in their child's school. Parents also noted that not all schools offered a welcoming environment that encouraged them to get involved.

### **What would help?**

Clear and honest reporting about progress and achievement helped parents to gauge how well their child was doing at school. Being involved in the development of their child's learning goals and getting regular feedback on progress helped strengthen their relationship with their child.

Parents appreciated informal as well as formal opportunities to interact with teachers. The use of home-school notebooks in some schools helped parents to stay in regular contact with the school. They liked it when teachers telephoned them with good news about their child and, for some parents, better use of email, text messaging and school websites was seen as important for improving communication.

Parents said they were better equipped to help their child with homework when they had a good knowledge of homework and assessment requirements. They found it useful when teachers gave their children written feedback on homework and when homework tasks included parent involvement.

### **Discussion**

This report highlights common themes about what different groups of parents thought about effective engagement between schools and their communities. The themes confirm ERO's findings about the successful engagement practices in schools as

reported in *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities* published in June 2008.

The common themes relate to expectations, relationships, communication, learning partnerships and parents' involvement in schools. Each theme is discussed in this section, identifying some of the critical factors that make engagement a positive experience for parents, and the barriers or challenges that make engagement difficult.

### **Expectations**

The findings show overwhelmingly that all parents, regardless of their background or where they choose to have their children educated, expect the best education for their children. Parents have high expectations of schools. They particularly expect teachers to engage and support children to achieve success, not just academically, but in other ways as well.

*I expect our mokopuna to achieve in everything they do...to achieve well across the board. The school helps them with this. I want both mokopuna to have learnt how to be honest and come out to be successful and have a career pathway. I want them to be good role models and maybe come back here one day and show others how they have done.*

Māori parent

Some parents talked about their frustrations when expectations were not being met.

*My son is very musical and there is a music room that he could work in but they won't let him use it. It is not one of his subjects and so he can't be involved. A visiting drummer came to school and he couldn't go because music was not a specialist subject of his.*

Māori parent

*Burmese refugee parents want to know how their children are learning and achieving and what they need to do to help their child. Most schools are not meeting this expectation. Some Burmese refugee parents want to be involved in school activities such as camps, day trips and helping in the library. They believe that generally schools are not meeting these expectations.*

Refugee parents

Some parents do not know what schools expect of them, particularly in relation to how they can engage as partners in their child's learning. Other parents view schools' expectations of them as largely driven by systems and as documented in policies and procedures.

*Schools expect us to support school systems, expectations and procedures for attendance, behaviour management and follow school protocols when wanting to visit teachers to discuss your child's progress.*

Māori parent

*Parents are unsure what schools expect – ‘there’s a big gap’. It’s often very difficult for parents to know who the right person is for them to talk to at a school. It’s especially confusing for parents if they have children of different ages and at different schools as each school has different procedures and expectations.*

Refugee parents

*Overall, parents felt schools had either few, or no, expectations of them as parents in terms of their engagement with their child’s school.*

Remote families

This evaluation highlights the importance of schools having a shared understanding about what each party can expect of the other. Developing ideas about respective roles and responsibilities and clarity about what constitutes effective engagement for both the school and parents is critical for successful engagement.

### **Relationships**

Developing and maintaining good relationships with school personnel matters for parents and their children. Although this is important for all parents, ERO found this was critical for those from minority groups where the potential to feel marginalised was more apparent.

Relationships that worked best were those that involved a two-way sharing of information. When teachers understood and valued the cultural backgrounds of students and their families, partnerships were strengthened. Parents said that being understood and valued encouraged them to become involved because staff knew them and parents were more confident to approach them. They felt there was always someone they could talk with at the school.

*Learning relationships develop when there is an understanding of tikanga, where Māori knowledge is recognised and understood. Currently this is not the experience of all whānau.*

Māori parent

*We have only just begun our involvement with kura. My wife is building those relationships with the kura – our twins have been there only two months. Establishing early relationships to build the rapport. At the moment the relationship is being built with the class teacher.*

Māori parent

*Parents feel that opportunities to help in their child’s class helps them to build better relationships with their child’s teacher and to know and understand more about what is happening at school for their child.*

Parents of children with special needs



*Parents are keen to be more involved in school activities and would like to learn about ways to encourage all Pacific parents to have strong relationships with schools. Presently, at this school there is not enough being done to encourage strong partnerships, especially in learning. Parents want to understand how they could better help their children but are dependent on schools to let them know their children's progress and achievement.*

Pacific parents

Parents want schools to create an environment in which, together with school staff, they can work in ways that are beneficial for them and their children.

### **Communication**

All parents talked about how important good levels of communication were for keeping them informed about their child and helping them understand more about the school. Some of the strategies that worked particularly well were regular contact with school staff, one-to-one discussions, oral as well as written reporting, and multilingual newsletters.

*I need to know exactly what is happening, which initiatives are available and the information that supports my child. When this happens there is a positive impact on my engagement with the school and with my child's learning.*

Māori parent

*The parents voiced that they expect schools to have good communication with parents. Parents need to know how well children are doing and what they as parents can do to help their child. They did not want schools to make contact only when something bad happened.*

Meeting with Pacific parents

Good communication connects parents with their child's school and keeps them up-to-date with what is happening in the school and with their child's learning.

### **Learning partnerships**

Celebrating progress and success was seen by many of the parents and families as a good way to recognise achievement. Some schools made a point of inviting families to assemblies and other occasions, so that the celebration was shared.

*When my child comes home and says 'did you know this?' That tells me they are learning. The school sent home a portfolio of work and you can compare all the work from the previous term and see how much the children have learnt. They let me as a parent comment and set goals with the children – I think that is great.*

Māori parent

*College teachers don't involve the whānau so much. You get tick charts for a report. If you want to know any more you have to make an effort to find out. If kids come home with a good attitude I know they are learning.*

Māori parent

*One parent felt that it wasn't enough for parents to see the snapshot of children's progress and achievement in one or two meetings with teachers. This parent thought that it would be useful for schools to have open days when parents can come in and see their children learning numeracy, on another occasion observe their child learning how to read, and provide opportunities for parents to observe their child learning in the different curriculum areas. The parent said that in this way parents would have a better understanding of the scope of the learning that happens and at the interview talk with the teacher about the child's learning and together identify where parent and teacher could best support the child.*

Pacific parents

Parents and families found it helpful when teachers provided guidance so that they could help their children with homework tasks. Homework was regarded as very important by many parents, and where homework or study centres were available these were seen as essential for their children's learning and progress. Having computers at some of these sites provided resources and opportunities sometimes not available in their homes, thereby addressing what some parents perceived as a disadvantage for their children.

*Parents enjoy helping with homework when they know what is expected of them and their child. They have a better idea of what their child is learning and 'where they are at'. It also provides opportunity for other family members to help, creating closer relationships between family members.*

Transient families

*Parents were also very keen for their children to receive regular homework as helping their children with homework gave them an indication of how well their children were doing at school.*

Pacific parents

*Parents said they appreciate reporting that gives a clear indication of where the child is and next steps for improving. It helps parents to affirm their children and give them peace of mind. They want to know that their child is progressing and meeting expectations. Accurate reporting helps parents to have realistic expectations for their children's future.*

Transient families

Home-school partnership programmes such as those for literacy and numeracy increased parents' engagement by raising their knowledge and skills in what they saw as critical learning areas. This in turn enabled them to support the learning of their children more confidently. Family literacy projects built parent capability.

*Parents found home-school partnership initiatives in literacy and numeracy useful. They taught them how to work with their children in maths and taught parents maths too.*

Pacific parents

*Parents felt that the primary school offered good support for parent education. Parents were involved in numeracy and literacy home-school partnership programmes. Parents spoke favourably about the home-school partnerships as it helped them to understand how children learn numeracy and literacy and how they can better support their children continue with their learning at home.*

Pacific parents

### **Getting involved**

Many parents indicated to ERO that they enjoyed being involved with their child's school and with their learning. Varied opportunities for involvement were beneficial for parents, teachers and students.

*Parents commented that their involvement with their children's school had a useful impact on the children's learning. Children enjoy seeing their parents at school and this provides a good incentive for them to do better at school. Positive connections between parents and teachers are also developed. This results in better communication between teachers and parents, and between the school and community as a whole.*

Pacific parents

*I enjoyed attending school trips with my son. It was great to get to know and meet his friends as they are all from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Overall it has been very educational for me and fun and since I now know how the school operates (its policies and community involvement). I can use this to inform myself in my second child's schooling.*

Parent (Chinese) of Year 6 student

*Parents indicated that what works best for them is their involvement in transporting and supervising students on trips and sports, and helping in such tasks as supervising the school patrol. They see the benefits in such involvement as:*

- *spending more time with their children;*
- *encouraging their children in their recreational activities;*
- *getting to know more about what happens at school; and*
- *getting to know other parents.*

*Such involvement appears to be a good non-threatening way of supporting their children, getting to know other people and learning about kiwi culture.*

Migrant parents

Some parents noted that having a representative on the school's board of trustees helped them to feel more engaged with their child's school. In addition, having whānau or family members involved in stand-downs and suspension processes was seen as a good way of increasing understanding and giving these people a voice in decision-making.

Waiata and reo classes were mentioned by Māori whānau as an effective way of attracting parents and whānau to the school. A group of Pacific parents had attended a parenting skills course at their children's school, and another group said that their

school had held a ‘Lavalava Day’. Events and activities such as these demonstrated schools’ commitment to their multicultural communities and their respect for them.

*Parents talked of a local school being proactive in attracting Pacific trustees on to the board of trustees, and promoting culture awareness practices, for example the Lavalava Day that students and teachers enjoy. This resulted in better understanding of Pacific cultures, and strengthening relationships between the school and Pacific communities. One parent talked of the principal of one local primary school who went through a dramatic change when the school’s Pacific community showed up in full support for a family bereavement.*

Pacific parents

Other effective means of encouraging engagement included organising social events at which parents and teachers could mingle and get to know each other, and parents could meet each other. The refugee group found this particularly helpful to them. In some school communities, parent groups met to support each other and to increase their involvement so they could better meet the specific needs of their children. Some parents said that it helped when the school held meetings at community venues, as they were more likely to attend.

### **What can schools do to better engage their communities**

This evaluation highlights what parents told ERO about their engagement with their child’s school. Schools may wish to think about some of the comments that apply to them and consider how they can improve the nature and quality of engagement with parents, whānau and the wider community.

The resource handbook for a home-school literacy programme cited ideas for schools to think about when setting up a home-school partnership. Based on a parent’s point of view, the handbook reminds teachers that:

*We are true partners when:*

- *you listen to what I have to say;*
- *you acknowledge my intelligence;*
- *you want to learn more about my ways;*
- *you don’t judge me;*
- *you engage me in genuine dialogue;*
- *we make decisions together;*
- *you show that my child matters to you; and*
- *you include my experience, knowledge and viewpoints with yours. (p123)<sup>2</sup>.*

These challenges resonate strongly with ERO’s findings in this report and in the report *Partners in Learning: Schools’ Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*, June 2008.

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education. *The home-school partnership programme*. Wellington, Learning Media, 2003.

This section of the report includes strategies and practices that can strengthen engagement. Each of the points listed above is expanded on in terms of what schools can do to strengthen their engagement with all groups in their community.

***You listen to what I have to say***

Schools can help by:

- being open and welcoming to parents and their child/children;
- creating opportunities and time for parents and whānau to talk to teachers about their children's learning and well-being;
- having interpreters available to support parents and overcome language barriers; and
- identifying appropriate staff as key contact people for specific groups of parents.

***You acknowledge my intelligence***

Schools can help by:

- promoting two-way sharing of information as part of the school's transition processes for new students and their parents and whānau;
- inviting parents and whānau to contribute the knowledge they have about their children to discussions about learning and goal setting; and
- offering more opportunities for sharing information about children.

***You want to learn more about my ways***

Schools can help by:

- getting to know and working with the different groups of parents that make up their school community;
- exploring ways to build teachers' knowledge of, and sensitivity to, different cultural values and practices;
- incorporating elements of working with diverse communities in school-wide professional development programmes; and
- actively supporting and fostering cultural groups in the school and the wider community.

***You don't judge me***

Schools can help by:

- showing respect for and acknowledging the cultural diversity of their community;
- challenging deficit views held by teachers about students and their families; and
- accepting and accommodating diversity, even when differences are not fully understood.

***You engage me in genuine dialogue***

Schools can help by:

- providing opportunities for regular informal and personalised dialogue with all parents;
- sharing information regularly and in a timely and appropriate way; and
- making opportunities to discuss parents' expectations for homework, and the schools' approach to it.

***We make decisions together***

Schools can help by:

- using a variety of ways to seek parents' perspectives when planning programmes and responding to the perceived needs of children;
- seeking and valuing the views and beliefs of parents and whānau when planning for children's learning and well-being; and
- including the views of all parents and whānau when establishing and reviewing school directions and priorities.

***You show that my child matters to you***

Schools can help by:

- being sensitive to the particular backgrounds and values of diverse groups, and reflecting this in the relationships with parents and whānau;
- asking parents for information about their children's interests, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, and other pertinent information;
- providing resources for cultural performance groups, such as funding, employing instructors from the community, or allocating time for the involvement of appropriate staff members; and
- showing parents and whānau that their input and initiative is not taken for granted, and that diverse cultures are valued in the school.

***You include my experience, knowledge and viewpoints with yours***

Schools can help by:

- giving priority to acquiring and using resources that reflect the diverse backgrounds of all children who attend each school;
- incorporating practices inclusive of their diverse community in school activities and events; and
- seeking, whenever possible, to have different groups in the school community represented on the staff and in the composition of the board of trustees.

These strategies and practices support an approach to engagement that embraces the principle of inclusion. When schools value and reflect the diversity in their community, the barriers to engaging parents and whānau are reduced or minimised.

## Conclusion

This report complements ERO's evaluation reports:

- *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*, June 2008, and
- *Partners in Learning: Good Practice*, September 2008.

The report highlights what parents and whānau from many different groups told ERO about their engagement with their child's school. Whatever the parents' backgrounds, or the needs of their child, clear and consistent messages emerge in relation to parents' expectations of education.

Most of the parents involved in this evaluation said they appreciated being asked by ERO for their views and liked the opportunity to meet with other parents or to give their feedback through a questionnaire. This enthusiastic response, and the issues raised by these parents, indicate that some New Zealand schools are not yet providing sufficient opportunities for parents to be consulted and involved, thus missing opportunities to promote parents' engagement in their children's learning.

A parent who attended one of the discussion groups noted:

*We expect that schools will involve us so we can work together to 'push things' in the same direction.*

ERO invites schools to consider the opinions expressed by the parents in this report and reflect on the effectiveness of their own engagement with parents, whānau and families.