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*Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Aotearoa*

# Successful Home-School Partnerships

Report to the Ministry of Education

A. Bull, K. Brooking and R. Campbell  
New Zealand Council for Educational Research

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*Report prepared for Ministry of Education*

Ally Bull, Keren Brooking, and Renee Campbell  
New Zealand Council for Educational Research



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## Executive summary

This report describes the findings of a research project designed to improve understanding of the key elements of successful<sup>1</sup> home–school partnerships and how they operate in some different school settings. The project includes a review of evidence and an empirical research component.

The review of evidence draws on seven international case studies that have data linking home–school partnership initiatives to improvements in student achievement, and four recent evaluations of New Zealand home–school partnership initiatives. The empirical research component consists of seven New Zealand case studies (and one mini case study). These case studies cover a range of schools including primary and secondary, low and high decile, urban and rural, a special school and a kura kaupapa Māori. In each school, interviews were held with the principal and groups of teachers, parents, and where appropriate, students.

The research literature is unequivocal in showing that parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement. Given this, it is not surprising that during the last decade or so there has been a high level of interest in interventions aimed at involving parents (especially “hard to reach” parents) more fully in the education of their children, as a means to raising educational achievement of children who are currently not performing to expectations in the education system. Research on interventions designed to promote parental involvement identifies a perceived need and increased demand; high levels of creativity and commitment by providers; and a range of approaches; and appreciation by families. However, as yet, there is little evidence as to what sort of involvement makes a difference to student achievement. The research literature does, however, suggest that successful home–school partnerships display many of the following features:

- Relationships in successful home–school partnerships are collaborative and mutually respectful.
- Successful partnerships are multi-dimensional, and responsive to community needs.
- Successful home–school partnerships are planned for; embedded within whole school development plans; well resourced and regularly reviewed.
- Successful partnerships are goal oriented and focused on learning.
- Effective parental engagement happens largely at home.
- There is timely two-way communication between school and parents in successful partnerships.

These features are also evident in many of the New Zealand case studies. However several other key ideas emerged. Within the case studies, there are examples of initiatives designed to serve a range of different purposes. Sometimes the purpose is simply giving information to parents, sometimes it is about aligning home–school practices, and sometimes it is about the school and home working together to create something that neither partner

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<sup>1</sup> In both the literature and in our case studies, we found little robust data linking home–school partnerships to improved outcomes for students. In this project, therefore, we extended the definition of “successful” home–school partnerships to include those where the partners had a commitment to education being a joint endeavour between school and family; a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership and their respective roles; and, where the partners were positive about the perceived benefits of the partnership for children’s learning.

could have produced on their own. Regardless of the purpose of the initiative, the development of positive relationships is an essential first step in developing successful home–school partnerships, and in some initiatives this is the whole focus.

Building successful home–school partnerships takes time and commitment. In nearly all the case study schools, teachers, parents, and sometimes children, thought the principal was a key player in the establishment of successful partnerships. Teachers’ attitudes also seem to be critical to the success of home–school partnerships. The manner in which power is shared is also an important influence on how partnerships develop.

Context affects the nature of partnerships and the way they develop. Home–school partnerships are perceived to be easier to establish in small schools, and in closely knit communities, and more difficult with secondary age students. “Outreach” workers can play an important role in establishing home–school partnerships in communities where the language and culture of the home is different from those of the teachers. The special character of special schools and the kura kaupapa Māori mean that the partnerships in those settings are qualitatively different from those in “mainstream” settings.

The case studies show that technologies such as mobile phones, the internet and DVDs are being used creatively to strengthen links between school and home. Several case study schools are also exploring ways of modifying current school practices such as parent–teacher interviews and homework as ways of facilitating genuine two-way communication between school and home.

One interesting finding was how little we really know about the effectiveness of home–school partnerships as strategies for reducing disparity and/or developing successful 21st century learners. The report concludes by raising some questions that we think are important to consider. Specifically it suggests that there is a need to find out more about exactly what sort of home–school partnerships are beneficial, how they are beneficial, and to whom.



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# 1. Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to improve understanding of the key elements of successful home–school partnerships, and how these partnerships operate in different school settings. The project has two parts—a review of evidence, and an empirical research component. Both parts of the project are reported on here.

This report is organised into four sections:

1. Summary of the main findings from the project
2. Review of evidence
3. New Zealand case studies
4. Discussion

The summary is positioned first to allow the reader to quickly access the main findings of this project. Sections 2–4 provide more detail and contextual background, and pose some high level questions that emerged from this project that we believe require further thought and debate.

The review of evidence draws on seven international case studies that have produced data linking home–school partnership initiatives to improvements in student achievement, and four recent evaluations of New Zealand home–school partnership initiatives. These studies are evaluated as to the extent to which they exemplify the key elements of successful home–school partnerships identified by the Ministry of Education in the Request for Proposals for this project. Additional “enablers” and barriers to home–school partnerships are also identified.

The empirical research component consists of seven New Zealand case studies of home–school partnerships and one mini case study. These case studies cover a range of schools including primary and secondary, low and high decile, urban and rural, a “special school” and a kura kaupapa Māori. These case studies are analysed in a similar way to those in the review of evidence and particular attention is paid to the nature of the partnerships in the schools and to context specific features that affect the partnerships.

The final section of this report draws together both components of the research project to suggest areas for further thought, discussion and research.



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## 2. Summary of main findings

This research project set out to answer the following questions:

- What are the main features of successful home–school partnerships and how do they operate in practice?
- What are the barriers and enablers to successful home–school partnerships?
- Are the success factors unique to the context?
- What is the impact of successful home–school partnerships on student presence, engagement and achievement?

To answer these questions we need to be clear about what “success” might mean in this context. If we take “successful” home–school partnerships to be those with documented evidence linking increased parental involvement in education with improved student achievement, then we would have very little to say. The most striking finding from the literature review in this project was the paucity of initiatives involving evaluations of student achievement. Similarly, in the New Zealand case studies we found very little robust data linking home–school partnerships to improved outcomes for students.<sup>2</sup>

If, however, we expand the definition of “successful” partnerships to include those in which the partners have a commitment to education being a joint endeavour between school and family; a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership and their respective roles; and in which the partners are positive about the perceived benefits of the partnership to student learning, there are some interesting points to make in relation to the research questions. This, then, is the definition of “success” that we used in this report.

Our main findings in relation to the research questions are outlined below.

### **What are the main features of successful home–school partnerships and how do they operate in practice?**

The research literature and our case studies suggest that successful home–school partnerships have certain key features. These features are outlined below.

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<sup>2</sup> This of course does not mean that initiatives aimed at increasing parental involvement in education do not contribute to improved outcomes for students, just that there are little data as yet showing that they do.

## **Features of successful home–school partnerships**

### **1. Relationships in home–school partnerships are collaborative and mutually respectful.**

The case studies all showed that establishing positive relationships was an essential first step in establishing successful home–school partnerships. Many teachers interviewed felt that their attitudes towards parents were really critical in the establishment of successful home–school partnerships. This was supported by our interviews with parents in schools with successful home–school partnerships, who said that they felt valued by the school, and that the positive attitudes of the principal and teachers encouraged them to get involved in school activities and their children’s education.

### **2. Successful home–school partnerships are multi-dimensional and responsive to community needs.**

Like the successful home-school partnerships identified in the research literature, most of our case study schools had a range of different strategies in place to facilitate engagement with parents. A number of schools in this project had adapted and modified the original Ministry of Education home–school partnership model in response to the needs of their communities. By listening to feedback from parents, schools were able to provide activities (and adapt them as necessary) to more closely meet the needs of the parent community. We found that it is important that parents have input in determining what sorts of activities they want to be involved in, and that their feedback about the effectiveness of these initiatives is listened to. For example, in one particularly successful partnership, the parents themselves determined that the focus of the home-school partnership should move from the school giving them general information about teaching strategies, to a focus on the learning of their individual children. At the parents’ request the school provided assessment data about student achievement and then, in response to feedback, experimented with ways of presenting data that were more meaningful for parents.

### **3. Successful home–school partnerships are embedded in school development plans; they are well resourced; and they are reviewed regularly.**

This project made it clear that there are some school types in New Zealand where home–school partnerships are absolutely fundamental to how the schools operate. The kura kaupapa Māori and special school case studies were examples of this. Neither of these schools could operate without home–school partnerships. In each of these schools there was a “seamlessness” between home and school, and a large area of overlap in responsibility for the education of the child between the school and the home. At the kura kaupapa Māori, school policies, practices and processes all assumed whānau participation. When whānau enrol their tamariki in the kura, they make a commitment to participating in the everyday life of the kura.

In “mainstream” schools with successful home–school partnerships, these partnerships were also embedded in the school’s planning, and there was a whole school commitment to working in that particular way.

### **4. Successful home–school partnerships are goal oriented and focused on learning.**

Although building relationships is an important initial step in establishing home–school partnerships, if the purpose of the partnership is to lift achievement, it is important that once the relationship is established there is a shift to a more task-oriented approach. In the case study where there was the strongest emphasis on learning, teachers and parents were developing a “shared language of learning” that enabled them to talk about achievement, progress and assessment, and both partners were clear about their roles in supporting learning. At this school, “learning messages” were consistent between home and school, parents had the opportunity to talk

and think about how their own education was different from that of their children, and there was an emphasis on teachers learning from parents as well as parents learning from teachers.

### **5. Effective parental engagement happens largely at home.**

Many of the case study schools had strategies in place to help parents support their children's learning at home. These included "study hints" in the school newsletter, the provision of specific questions for parents to ask children about their learning, interactive homework requiring input from the family, and sharing learning goals with families so they can reinforce their children's out-of-school learning.

### **6. There is timely two-way communication between school and parents in successful home-school partnerships.**

The parents we interviewed in the empirical research component of this project were clear that if they are to be able to support their children's learning, they need to have good communication with the school, accurate information about their children's progress and information about school programmes in general. It seems there are some current practices such as homework and parent-teacher interviews that could, with slight modifications, give the parents this information while at the same time allowing teachers to draw on the expert knowledge parents have about their own children. Where home-school partnerships seemed to be working well, teachers were aware of the extent to which they could learn from parents and there was genuine two-way communication.

### **7. Building successful home-school partnerships takes time and commitment.**

In several of our case studies, principals reported that involving parents in the education of their children became easier as time went on. If early strategies for enhancing parental engagement were seen by parents as worthwhile, parents were more likely to take a more active role in subsequent initiatives. In many schools with successful home-school partnerships, the principal was identified by teachers, parents, and sometimes students, as a key player in the development of the partnerships. The commitment of staff was also critical to the success of home-school partnerships though, and some principals were specifically recruiting staff with a commitment to the idea.

## **What are the barriers and enablers to successful home-school partnerships?**

In the case studies we identified a range of features that either encouraged or inhibited the development of successful home-school partnerships. At a high level, teachers' beliefs about education, the purpose of schools and their role as teachers are critical in determining the sorts of partnerships that develop. The research literature also suggests that parents' perception of teachers' attitudes, how parents see their role in the education of their children, and their own experience of schooling are important influences on whether or not they become involved in their children's education.

At another level, there are important specific local or demographic factors that should be taken into account when implementing home-school partnership initiatives. These include differences in school size, community make-up and type of school. Finally, we identified some practices at the school level in the case studies that seemed to be effective in promoting and strengthening partnerships. These could serve as models for other schools.

These features are described below in relation to our case studies.

## **Barriers and enablers**

### **1. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about education**

Where teachers are committed to working closely with parents, and see this partnership as being beneficial to their own teaching as well as to student learning, the time and effort needed to establish such relationships is not seen by teachers as being a burden. For these teachers, home–school partnerships are not an optional ‘extra’ but rather they are integral and essential to their core work of teaching.

### **2. Engaging parents through their children**

The involvement of students as active partners in home–school partnerships seems to be particularly powerful. In the case studies there were many examples of schools replacing traditional parent–teacher interviews with three-way learning conferences involving teacher, parent and student. In one school, children were taking an active role in running parent evenings designed to inform parents about school programmes, and at another, teachers were encouraging students to use the school mobile phones to ring home with “good news” stories about their achievements in class. It seems parents are interested in what their own children are doing at school and these activities can provide the motivation for parents to become more actively involved in their children’s education.

### **3. Size of the school**

At many of the case study schools, participants in this study felt that in small schools it is much easier to establish and maintain successful home–school partnerships.

### **4. Clearly defined sense of community**

Schools that serve clearly defined communities seem to find it is easier to establish successful home–school partnerships. In areas where parents know each other well (and sometimes the teachers) they reported that it is easier to get involved in the school. In one of our case studies all the schools in an area were working together to build home–school partnerships and develop this same sense of “belonging”.

### **5. Outreach workers**

In communities where the cultural practices and the languages spoken in many homes are different from those of the teachers, successful home–school partnerships seem largely dependent on the effective participation of “outreach workers”. These are people with expertise or status in the community who can act as intermediaries between school and the home.

### **6. Age of students**

Many of the parents interviewed in this study, said that they were more confident about being involved in their children’s education when their children were younger. Several parents also said their older children did not want them to be involved in their school lives. This perhaps signals a need for the development of explicit strategies to encourage the participation of parents of secondary age students.

## **7. Use of technology**

Many schools are making use of technology to try and reach more parents and to involve parents who may not be able to come into the school in their children's school life. Examples of this were the use of text messaging and emails, school newsletters and class notices on-line, and making DVDs to show what children were doing at school.

## **8. A wide range of school-initiated communication**

Schools that make communicating with parents a priority are more likely to establish successful home-school partnerships. Although successful home-school partnerships rely on *two-way* communication, an important first step in opening the lines of communication is to regularly send information out to parents. The responsibility for providing information needs to lie with the school, rather than relying on parents to seek out the information they need. Successful communication strategies can be quite diverse. For example, they could involve the incidental face to face communication that occurs when parents drop off or pick up children from school, or the children themselves could be used to convey information to parents. More formally, a wide range of written communications, including newsletters translated into community languages, could be used. Some schools in the case studies were using other media, such as the local radio, to advertise school news.

## **Are the success factors unique to the context?**

Although every school has its own unique context, some elements of successful home-school partnerships seem able to be generalised across schools. It seems that a critical step in developing successful home-school partnerships is establishing a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership for staff as well as parents, regardless of the context of the school. Where the idea of partnership fits with beliefs about the purpose of schooling, initiatives are more likely to be sustained and schools are in a better position to tailor partnership initiatives to meet the needs of their particular communities.

Home-school partnerships appear most deeply embedded in schools where there is a clearly articulated philosophy that sees home-school partnerships as integral to the work of the school. The importance of this was highlighted by the kura kaupapa Māori and the special school in our case studies. The special character of these schools meant that the home-school partnerships that were developing there were qualitatively different from the partnerships being developed in the "mainstream" schools. In these schools, the partnerships were more than an "add on". They were fundamental to the operation of the schools.

Home-school partnerships were also strong in mainstream schools where staff had been recruited because of their beliefs about the importance of home-school partnerships, or where teachers had spent time thinking and talking about home-school partnerships and why they were important. In these schools in the case studies, teachers clearly saw home-school partnerships as beneficial to the development of their own teaching practice as well as to student learning. Principals were key players in the development of staff thinking about partnerships. Many of the principals in the case studies were relatively new to their school and were establishing home-school partnerships, along with other initiatives, as a way to improve the performance of the school.

## **What is the impact of successful home–school partnerships on student presence, engagement and achievement?**

The most striking finding from the review of evidence component of this project was the lack of direct evidence of a relationship between home–school partnerships and improved student achievement. This is not to say that home–school partnerships do *not* contribute to improved learning outcomes for students, just that as yet we have very little hard evidence that they do. However, even if data were available it would be difficult to make causal claims, given the complexity of the school context and the myriad of initiatives and strategies operating at any particular time and possibly contributing to any measured improvement in achievement.

As for achievement, the research evidence connecting home-school partnerships with improvements in student presence and/or engagement was patchy. In our case studies, three schools had data showing improvements in attendance and achievement over the time the home–school partnerships (along with many other initiatives) had been operating. According to the ERO reports for two other schools in the study, students were “engaged and well motivated to learn”. The ERO report for another of our case-study schools explicitly linked the school’s involvement with its community with its development of a “positive learning environment”. Anecdotally (in our interviews), principals, teachers, parents and students reported that they felt parental engagement in learning was contributing to better outcomes for students. However, none of this is robust evidence of a causal connection.

## **Conclusion**

In the review of the literature and the empirical research component of this study we found little evidence of direct links between home–school partnerships and improved student outcomes. However, this is not to say that there are not links. This is an area where there are, as yet, few longitudinal studies specifically designed to look for the impact of such initiatives.

Possibly because this is an emerging area of interest in NZ, there is a lack of clarity over the general purposes of home–school partnerships. In some of our case-study schools the home–school partnership’s purpose seemed to be to build relationships with parents, while in others the focus seemed to be to communicate with parents. This communication could be one-way or two-way, it could be about individual students, pedagogical issues, school organisation—or any combination of these things. In other schools the partnership’s purpose was to build better alignments between home and school. Here, the focus was either on trying to get families to do more “school-like” activities at home, or on finding out about home cultural practices in an attempt to develop more culturally appropriate teaching practices at school. Finally, some partnerships seemed to be based on the idea of the school and family working together, drawing on their respective areas of expertise to create learning opportunities that neither partner could produce on their own. We suggest that if those involved in home–school partnerships were clearer about what the purpose of the partnership was, and the intended outcomes, the strategies would be more focused, and it would be feasible to attempt to measure their impact.

In the New Zealand context, it seems that the Ministry of Education home–school partnership model has been successful in many schools as a catalyst for school communities to start thinking about the value of building better relationships with parents. Many schools have been able to adapt this model to suit the individual needs of their particular communities. There are however some current school practices, such as parent-teacher conferences and homework, that we think could easily be modified to encourage greater parent engagement. Many of the New Zealand case study schools were running three-way conferences, instead of the traditional parent-teacher



interview, and, in both the New Zealand context and the research literature, there were examples of interactive homework projects that required input from families. We think, in terms of sustainability, there are advantages in attempting to embed home–school partnership ideas in current practice, rather than treating home–school partnerships as an “add on”.

With the recent introduction of the new New Zealand curriculum with its focus on 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning, and the key competencies in particular, we believe it is important to find ways to allow learning to occur across the boundary between school and homes. Schools are only one context where learning occurs and if the curriculum’s vision of developing “young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.7) is to be realised, we need to find ways of drawing together and validating student learning that occurs both in and outside school. (Perhaps kura kaupapa Māori and special schools could provide “food for thought” here.) If home–school partnerships are to support 21st Century learning, and to lift achievement they need to be thoughtfully developed to ensure clarity of the roles of the partners and the purpose of the partnership itself. This requires teachers in particular to have the opportunity to think and talk about the reasons behind partnerships, rather than becoming immediately concerned with the practicalities of implementing partnership initiatives.

The rest of this report discusses examples of successful home–school partnerships from both the research literature and our own New Zealand case studies and then draws these together to suggest areas for further thought, discussion and research.



### 3. Review of evidence

The review of evidence component of this project begins by briefly summarising the main findings of the research literature on parental involvement in education, identifying factors that enable successful home–school partnerships. It then identifies recent international examples of home–school partnerships that have been evaluated for their effect on student achievement, and looks at the extent to which they align with the following six key elements of successful home school partnerships identified by the Ministry of Education in the Request for Proposals for this project:

- partnerships with “learning” as the focus have the biggest impact on student learning outcomes;
- partnerships that align school and home practices and enable parents to support their children in school work best;
- building strong home–school partnerships takes time and commitment from both partners;
- the relationship needs to be built on the circumstances of each individual school and its community;
- the relationship needs to drive off a strengths–based rather than a deficit based model; and
- the relationship needs to be one of equals. Programmes where the school is the dominant partner will not work as well as those where there is a genuine partnership. A facilitator or mediator (particularly where there are cultural or language differences) can be useful in establishing this.

The review of evidence then looks at some evaluations of recent New Zealand home–school partnerships, in terms of the above six elements. It builds on the literature highlighted in the 2003 BES report *Best Evidence Synthesis: The complexity of community and family influences on children’s achievement in New Zealand*.

Finally, the review of evidence summarises the factors that seem to be important in enabling successful home–school partnerships, and begins a discussion of the barriers to successful home–school partnerships.

#### Parental involvement

The research literature is unequivocal in showing that parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement. Research consistently shows that:

- parental involvement takes many forms;
- involvement in the form of “at home good parenting” has a significant impact on student achievement;
- other forms of parental involvement do not appear to contribute to the same degree as “at-home parenting”;
- involvement diminishes as students get older;
- parents are likely to be more involved if their child is doing well at school; and
- differences in parents’ level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty and parental perception of their role in their child’s education.

In short, parenting affects students’ achievement by shaping the child’s identity as a learner and through setting higher expectations for the child (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003).

Given this it is not surprising that during the last decade or so there has been a high level of interest in interventions aimed at involving “hard to reach” parents more fully in the education of their children, as a means to raising educational achievement of children who are currently not performing to expectations in the education system. In Britain for example the Children’s Act 2004 explicitly focuses on this (Carpentier & Lall, 2005). Similar policy initiatives are seen in the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

## Enhancing parental involvement

Research on interventions designed to promote parental involvement identifies a perceived need and increased demand; high levels of creativity and commitment by providers; a range of approaches; and appreciation by clients. Many of the evaluations of these interventions, however, are technically weak and/or do not describe the impact on student learning (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Harris and Goodall (2007) in their review of the literature, reiterate that parent involvement in education can foster positive learning outcomes for students, but that, as yet, there is little evidence as to what kinds of involvement make a difference. They do, however, identify certain key characteristics shared by schools that succeed in engaging diverse groups of parents. Firstly, such schools focus on building collaborative relationships among teachers, families and other members of the community and, secondly, they recognise, respect, and address differing family needs.

Epstein’s (1995) theory of over-lapping spheres of influence is a useful tool for understanding how building collaborative relationships between schools, families and communities can benefit students’ learning. Schools, families and the wider community each make a unique contribution to the development of the child and these contributions are strengthened when all parties are aware of their own and each others’ roles and practices, and work together to create a “learning” community with the child at the centre. Accompanying this theory of how social frameworks connect, Epstein has created an “organising framework” that outlines six areas of shared responsibility:

1. parenting;
2. communicating;
3. volunteering;
4. learning at home;
5. decision-making; and
6. collaborating with community.

According to Epstein and Sheldon (2006) home–school partnerships should be seen as multi-dimensional, covering all of the above areas. Each area of shared responsibility has its own particular challenges that must be solved to reach all families and produce positive results. Thus successful home–school partnerships need to be comprehensive and responsive to different needs.

Current evidence suggests that if home–school partnerships are to make a *sustainable* difference for all children, certain conditions need to be in place (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Harris & Goodall, 2007). These include:

- strategic planning that embeds home–school partnerships within whole school development plans and a commitment to review;
- ongoing support, resourcing and training; and
- community involvement at all levels and multi-level leadership.

In addition, the work of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) in the US, and more recently the SHARE<sup>3</sup> initiative in the UK, suggests that networked systems that promote the sharing of experiences between schools are useful.

If the aim of home–school partnerships is to improve outcomes for students, then the focus needs to be on learning. Parental *involvement* in schools is not sufficient to impact positively on student achievement: what is needed is parental *engagement* in learning. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that goal-oriented, subject specific initiatives that encouraged parents to participate with children in home-based activities impacted positively on student learning. Furthermore, a series of Ofsted reports (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003) highlight that, in Britain, schools that have been successful in promoting achievement for ethnic minority group students have, among other things, close links with parents.

These schools listen to parents' concerns, are open with them and work with them at resolving differences. Parents' understanding of their children's progress is founded on rigorous discussion, honest reporting and swift contact when important information needs to be shared. (Ofsted, 2002, report No. 448, p4 cited in Desforges & Abouchar, 2003, p62).

Two-way, timely communication is thus another key element of successful home–school partnerships. Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph (2003), in their review of research on community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand identify providing ongoing opportunities for informal, non-threatening contacts between parents and teachers, and encouraging parent to parent communication within communities, as two principles for successful partnerships.

Katyal and Evers (2007) also support the need for enhancing regular communication between school and home. They maintain that gathering information about students in an organised and systematic way, and promoting two-way communication between school and home has become increasingly important, in an era where more learning happens outside the school via the internet and other technologies. They argue that communication is the most relevant aspect of home–school partnerships.

Katyal and Evers challenge the currently predominant view in education that assumes that families and schools need to see themselves as team players that contribute equally to decision-making processes. In their study of home school interaction and communication in three Hong Kong schools which all had strong, active Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), they found that teacher participants did not see themselves as equal partners with parents, nor did they want to be. They saw themselves as instructional leaders, and the parents' role as being one

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<sup>3</sup> The aims of this project are to improve the educational attainment of children, to motivate parents to take an active interest in their children's education and to further their own education, and to develop effective management and organisation of parental involvement in schools.

of supporting the academic education of their children. Parents and students agreed with this.<sup>4</sup> Parent and teacher roles overlap in terms of their responsibility for the socialisation of children (by being role models and imparting values and life skills). Thus teachers have parent-like roles (where there is shared responsibility and a more equal partnership with parents). In addition however, they have a professional role (where they are the “experts” and the relationship is perhaps closer to one of professional and client). This however does not negate the need for mutually respectful relationships and good communication between home and school, it just emphasises that “equal” does not necessarily imply “the same”, and that it is important to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each party, and the purpose of the relationship.

## International home–school partnership projects

This section looks at some international home–school partnership projects and evaluates the extent to which they exemplify the six key elements identified by the Ministry of Education in the Request for Proposals for this project. (We have organised our summary of the findings of these projects under these six headings). An extensive review of the international literature on home–school partnerships found very few examples of projects that had generated data linking the partnerships to improved achievement for students. This was the primary criteria used in selecting the projects described below. Priority was also given to research and evaluations from the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada and Australia published since 2000, and recent evaluations of New Zealand Ministry of Education initiatives were also included. As much of the current research literature on home–school partnerships focuses on literacy, we were particularly interested in programmes that focused on other curriculum areas. Also of interest were programmes that focused on homework and reporting to parents as although these appear on one level to be useful contexts for involving family in student learning, research<sup>5</sup> indicates that these are areas where there can also be negative impacts on building partnerships.

### 1. Successful partnerships focus on learning.

We selected from the research literature seven evaluations of home–school partnerships where there were links to achievement data. Learning was a clear focus in all of these international successful home–school partnership initiatives. The main features of these seven initiatives are outlined below:

#### *Focus on Results in Math (USA)*

This project is part of an on-going American study of the measurable effects of home–school partnerships on students in schools (primary and secondary) that are members of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS).

The connection between eight family involvement activities and student achievement in mathematics was explored in 18 diverse schools in 1997–1998. The activities were: workshops for parents; families being given information on how to contact the math teacher at school; parent-teacher conferences to discuss student progress

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<sup>4</sup> The authors caution that the context of the case study schools is one of high professional expectations of the teaching workforce and an acceptance of the specialised nature of secondary education and that this needs to be taken into consideration when generalising these results to other contexts. However many parents interviewed in the empirical component of the current project saw their role as being to *support* teachers.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Epstein (2001), Walker (1998)

in mathematics; report cards giving information on mathematics progress; parent volunteers tutoring students in school; mathematics homework that requires students to show and discuss mathematics skills with a family member; and a lending library or other provision of maths activities to use at home.

The analysis indicated that only the activities that related to learning at home (interactive homework and provision of resources) were consistently linked with improvements in student achievement. Specific examples of these types of activities included: students and parents being asked to compile a list of ten ways in which they used math in everyday life; weekly homework folders that required parents and children to complete a 15 minute activity together each night; students being required to demonstrate new skills to parents and discuss the use of the skill in every day life; and the provision of games and other materials to encourage parent-child interactions.

### *The Ocean Math Project: Tower Hamlets, London (UK)*

This project aims to improve pupils' attainment in mathematics through parental involvement. The project, which was supported by the Ocean New Deals for Communities (NDC), took place in two London secondary schools with high numbers of Bangladeshi students and provided workshop activities in mathematics for parents and students and also developed homework activities in collaboration with the school teaching staff. The effect of these activities was then evaluated. The success of this project in building links between parents and the schools seems to be mainly due to the "outreach workers", all of whom were Bangladeshi. The parents reportedly appreciated the programme so much that they asked for workshops to be provided in subjects other than maths. In terms of outcomes for students, homework completion rates improved and one school had a 10 percent increase in Key Stage 3 mathematics results while the other school had a 12 percent increase (both schools' results were higher than the London Borough of Tower Hamlets average in KS 3 following the project, and both schools are in one of the poorest areas in London).

### *Interactive homework (USA)*

Using findings from various studies of homework and family involvement, Epstein et al designed an interactive homework programme known as TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork). The TIPS homework assignments typically involve objectives for learning, instructions for completion, and explicit instructions to the student about involving their family. The assignments are assigned once a week or fortnightly and students are given several days to complete them to allow for other family commitments. Certain sections require family interaction and the family provides feedback as to how helpful the assignment was for them and the children.

In one study examining the effects of interactive homework on science achievement, attitudes towards science and family involvement in homework Van Voorhis (2003) found the six classes of sixth and eighth grade students who participated in the 18 week study scored higher than the control group on all measures. A five year, multi-cohort longitudinal study of the National Network of Partnership Schools has "interactive homework" as a special focus. Initial results indicate that interactive homework has a positive effect on parental involvement and student attitude in math and language arts. (Science data are not yet available, nor is achievement data for language arts; however the maths achievement data demonstrates positive outcomes for students). (Epstein, Sanders, & Sheldon, 2007).

Bailey (2006) describes an evaluation of a project in the USA where the TIPS model of interactive homework (from NNPS) was used to help parents support their children with reading homework, and, in particular, to make

inferences from what they were reading. At one school parents were taught how to interact with students during interactive homework activities, while at a second school students were given interactive homework assignments but there was no parent training. At the third school, students completed traditional homework activities. Results showed that students who were involved with interactive homework and whose parents participated in training scored significantly higher on a test of inference than the other students. The parents of these students also reported that they felt better able to help their children. They also said the project had helped them understand how their involvement could impact on their children's learning.

### ***Mother-tongue GCSE (Islington and Hackney, London, UK)***

This project aims to improve parental involvement and the development of family literacy through the study of home languages and the preparation of both parents and students for the GCSE examination. Bilingual students are given the opportunity to learn and use their mother tongue for official examinations with the help of their parents. The project is run by an education consulting agency that focuses on recruiting, training and finding long term placements for overseas trained teachers living in the UK. A pilot was run in 2002 and 2003 at one school. Five students (and five of their parents) studied for a GCSE in Turkish. The project involved a one-hour lesson once a week after school, attended by parents and children together. The lessons were taken by a mother-tongue trained teacher living in the UK. Of the ten participants in this pilot, nine achieved A or A\* results in the GCSE exam. Following the success of this pilot, the project was extended to eight primary schools and three secondary schools with programmes running in Turkish, French (for the Congolese community) and Bengali with 120 exam entries. Seventy three percent of the participants (both students and parents) in these projects gained GCSE passes (even though some of the parents did not actually sit the exam). Anecdotally it appears that parents became much more involved with the schools themselves during the project.

### ***The School-Family-Partnership programme in Acre, Israel***

This project's overall goal was to help parents support their children in school and to help teachers appreciate the families' culture, language and their educational aspirations for their children. The programme consisted of:

parents and teachers participating in bi-weekly activities within schools, and between schools in the area. These activities included workshops for parents and their children, group guidance for parents, sessions of shared learning, open days for parents, parent-child reading and writing, regular and constant communication with parents, exchanging of information, feedback and evaluation forms, home visits, parent volunteering and community-wide celebrations related to literacy and culture (Hertz-Lazarowitz and Horowitz, 2002)

The perceptions, of the 236 parents, of their roles in promoting literacy were compared with the views of 274 parents in a control group of schools. Student achievement data were also compared. Results showed that the School-Family-Partnership programme had a positive impact for parents, teachers and students, and that academic achievement in reading and writing was higher for children in classrooms that implemented the School-Family-Partnership.

### ***Book Checkout programme (USA)***

The Book Checkout Programme (BCP) was developed in Florida as a way of helping parents support the reading development of their children.



BCP centres on a weekly book checkout activity at Title 1<sup>6</sup> elementary school family resource centres. Each centre is staffed by a parent involvement paraprofessional and a family social worker. The atmosphere of the parent centre is designed to be parent friendly and conducive to conversation between parents and staff and between parents and children. The centre is stocked with a large variety of leveled and chapter books, including books in Spanish for schools with Hispanic families. Parents check out books to read to and with their children. Staff members give parents guidance for reading with their children, reinforcing the children's use of reading strategies (Clay, 1991), and locating resources for specific family issues....The BCP staff also assists parents in choosing the appropriate level of book for their child, who selects a free book on every visit to the programme. The BCP, therefore, can result in the eventual accumulation of a sufficient number of books to create a home library.' (Janiak, 2003. p4.)

For the eight primary schools and one early childhood centre using the BCP, participation rates increased from 184 students in 1996 to 1,876 in 2002. An evaluation sample of 792 students was selected. Approximately half these students were classified as 'frequently participating families' (attending at least ten times in the current year) and the rest as 'minimally participating families' (attending three times or less). Families with frequent participation reported reading to and with their children more often, the children appeared more positive about reading both in school and for recreation and these students also had higher reading achievement than their peers. In all these areas the differences between 'frequently participating families' and 'minimally participating families' were statistically significant. However the design of the evaluation did not allow any causal connections to be made.

### ***Solid Foundation: A comprehensive programme for parental engagement (USA)***

Redding, Langdon, Meyer & Sheley (2004) reported on the evaluation of a programme of comprehensive parent engagement strategies in 129 high poverty primary schools in Illinois. These 129 schools were part of programme, called Solid Foundation, that aims to engage parents in the school community through shared leadership, training and activities for parents and teachers, and home visits as a way of lifting student achievement in reading. The strategies implemented by the schools included:

- parent participation in decision making at school;
- alignment of the schools' policies and procedures regarding homework and parent teacher conferences with rubrics of research-based practices;
- explicit discussion of the roles of parents, teachers, students around compacts, learning standards and homework policies;
- reading school-home links aligned with state standards and in-class instruction
- parent education focused on home reading and study habits; and
- outreach through home visits, family nights, and a family resource library. (p3)

All the strategies were successfully implemented in project schools. The project schools also demonstrated increases in state reading assessment tests that were significantly above schools not in the project and which had identical beginning scores.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is an American term, related to special funding entitlements for schools serving low socio-economic communities.

<sup>7</sup> Between 2001 and 2003 the percentage of students at Solid Foundation schools meeting expectations on the composite state assessment score increased from 51.3% to 55.8%. While this increase of percentages is not large, it compares favourably with the increase of percentages of students meeting expectations for *all* schools in the state which was from 63.8% to 63.9%.

As well as having a focus on learning the seven initiatives described above also illustrated many of the other six key elements of successful home–school partnerships identified by the Ministry of Education in the Request for Proposals for this project.

## 2. Successful home–school partnerships align home and school practices

The initiatives described above all had a focus on aligning home and school practices, with most including an aspect of educating parents about school practice and making suggestions for activities families could do at home to support students' learning. The activities in the *Focus on Maths* project that were shown to make a difference were those that related to learning at home. Similarly the interactive homework initiatives, with their explicit emphasis on supporting parents to interact with students' learning at home were shown to be linked to gains in student achievement. Where parental training on ways to help their children, was added to interactive homework, gains in achievement were even higher. The *Book Checkout* programme also included an aspect of parent education, with staff giving parents guidance as to how to support their children's emerging reading strategies when reading at home. The *Ocean Maths*, *Mothertongue GCSE*, and *the School–Family–Partnership in Acre* projects all involved parents and students learning together at workshops.

## 3. Building successful home–school partnerships takes time and commitment from both partners

In their report on a longitudinal study of more than 300 mainly primary schools in over 20 states that were part of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) for between two and four years, Sheldon & Van Voorhis (2004) estimated that most schools needed at least three years to implement high quality, comprehensive partnerships. They suggested that successful programmes also required the support of not only an Action Team for Partnership, but the entire school community. Redding, Langdon et al. (2004) in their evaluation of the Solid Foundation programme agreed that a comprehensive intervention was the key to success. They concluded though that a critical mass of constructive home–school activity could be generated in a relatively short period, if there was support from across the school community. The evaluations of the other projects in this review did not explicitly address this aspect of successful home–school partnerships.

## 4. Successful home–school partnerships are built on the circumstances of individual schools and their communities

Both the *Ocean Maths* and *Mothertongue GCSE* projects specifically addressed the needs of their particular communities by providing learning opportunities in families' first languages. According to Carpentier & Lall (2005) in the *Ocean Maths* project, the role of the outreach workers (all of whom were Bangladeshi) was critical for ensuring a high rate of attendance and involvement by parents. A key feature of TIPS interactive homework programmes is that the assignments are assigned once a week or fortnightly and students are given several days to complete them to allow for other family commitments. In this way these programmes also cater for families' differing circumstances.

Although this was not obvious in the projects in this review, in their report on the comprehensive school reform model, Sheldon and Van Voorhis (2004) found differences in the types of parental involvement at primary and secondary schools. Primary schools reported greater levels of parent volunteering, more extensive distribution of

newsletters home, and greater use of learning activities to encourage student–parent interactions. Secondary schools on the other hand reported more school–community partnerships and more parents involved in school decision making. They suggested that effective partnerships may involve different activities at different levels of the school system.

## 5 & 6 Successful home–school partnerships are strengths based and the relationship is one of equals

In a successful home–school partnership both partners do not necessarily contribute equally to all aspects of education. It is important not to think of “equal” as synonymous with “the same”. In some aspects of education one partner can be expected to have more influence than in others. Equality involves mutually respectful relationships that acknowledge the different areas of expertise and the contributions of all involved, share information, and have clearly defined and jointly agreed roles and responsibilities. Redding, Langdon et al. (2004) in their evaluation of the Solid Foundation programme maintain that the on–going discussions between parents and teachers about their respective roles in students’ learning were critical in building relationships and understanding that enhanced learning.

The *Ocean Maths*, and *Mothertongue GCSE* projects were run by community organisations, drawing on the skills of facilitators in the community, rather than by the schools themselves. Similarly the *Book Checkout* programme was staffed by a parent involvement paraprofessional and a family social worker rather than by teachers. It can be argued that this way of working especially when it involves outreach workers from the parents’ own communities, has the potential to increase the confidence and skills of minority group parents to participate in more equal relationships with teachers. According to Carpentier and Lall (2005), the involvement of outreach workers, and the clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of people involved were two of the key elements in the success of the *Ocean Maths Project*.

The *School–Family–Partnership programme in Acre* is another example of how a project can encourage strength–based partnerships where the relationship is one of equals. The explicit aim of this project was to both help parents support their children in school and also to help teachers appreciate the families’ culture, language and educational aspirations for their children. In this way it recognised that both parties had important contributions to make to enhance the students’ learning.

Janes and Kermani (2001) describe a Family Literacy Tutorial Project in southern California which was funded by the Literacy Corps and run by the Graduate school of Education at a local university. Although this case study does not have student achievement data to support it, it is a useful illustration of how partnerships with parents can be designed in ways that capitalize on what is important to, and valued by, parents. The project experienced an initial lack of success and very high drop out rate but this was transformed into 100 percent retention rate and high community support following a change in emphasis that moved this project from a deficit–based model to a strengths–based model.

Initially the project was based on traditional school literacy practices and designed specifically to encourage parents to ask children increasingly complex questions about selected texts. Although parents diligently attempted to follow tutors’ questioning models, only about 30 percent managed to “walk the talk” when reading with children. They continued to see the primary function of reading as extracting information and showed little

enjoyment in reading with their children. An evaluation of the project suggested that procedures taken for granted by tutors such as pre- and post-testing, and the selection of certain texts served to remind the participants that their own versions of literacy did not “measure up” and hence the lack of enthusiasm for the project. In the second year of the project (in response to the high drop out rate of parents and comments made in “exit interviews”) two series of parent workshops designed to foster the sorts of literacy valued by both home and school were implemented. During these workshops the participants created their own story books. It was hypothesized that using their own texts would give parents more time, energy and motivation to scaffold their children’s understanding of the text. These books were preferred over commercially produced texts by both parents and children for repeated re-readings. Both parents and children displayed pleasure from working together on these literacy-based activities. From these shared book-making activities, parental attendance at workshops increased, and further collaborative activities grew, culminating in a literacy fair organised by parents.

This case study illustrates the importance of a strengths-based model in engaging parents in their children’s learning. Given the opportunity of working with texts that were familiar and culturally appropriate, parents were able to effectively support their children’s literacy development. Attempting to replicate in the home the sorts of literacy practices that children participate in school, rather than culturally valued practices, may serve to alienate some families. For children where the home and school contexts are very different it would seem especially important that there is good two-way communication between school and home, and mutually respectful relationships so that the expertise of both parties can be used to strengthen learning opportunities for children. The importance of effective two-way communication is discussed further below in the section on barriers to developing successful home–school partnerships.

## **Recent New Zealand evaluations of home–school partnerships**

In the *Best Evidence Synthesis* on community and family influences on children’s achievement Biddulph et al., (2003) describe a range of NZ projects aimed at developing home–school partnerships. (These projects are not covered in this overview as we have assumed the readers of this report will be familiar with this work). Since this *Best Evidence Synthesis* was published a range of other home–school partnership initiatives have been developed. These include the Manurewa Enhancement Initiative<sup>8</sup>, the Flaxmere Project, and several Ministry of Education home–school partnership initiatives. These projects are described briefly below.

### ***The Flaxmere project***

The Flaxmere project was a partnership involving five Flaxmere schools, their school communities and the Ministry of Education. It began in 2001 and aimed among other things, to build relationships between schools, caregivers and community. The project consisted of several different initiatives including: Home School Liaison Persons, Computers in Homes, homework support, and other initiatives that were specific to individual schools. The key findings of the evaluation of this project were:

- the Computers in Homes programme was considered highly effective with high levels of computer use reported;

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing this report, the evaluation of the Manurewa Enhancement Initiative, (Carpenter, & McMurchy-Pilkington, forthcoming). has not yet been released.

- the computers gave the Home School Liaison Persons a starting point for talking about school and related issues;
- the homework centres supported parents by taking away the pressure of having to help with homework, and by teaching those who attended how to help their children;
- the students perceived major improvements in their learning and behaviour; and
- parents were able to better support their children.

However, the three year evaluation period was not considered long enough to be able to show significant and sustained increases in achievement. Students involved in the Flaxmere Project made higher gains in their enjoyment of both reading and maths than students not in the project, but achievement gains were seen only in reading, not maths. The principals involved believed there was considerable evidence of short-term success, but that longer term outcomes could be compromised by such issues as lack of funding/ lack of sustainability (Clinton, Hattie, & Dixon, 2007).

### *Home-school Partnership: Literacy*

The Ministry Home-School Partnership: Literacy programme began in 2001 and had been implemented in about 100 schools when it was evaluated in 2006/7. The programme targeted Pasifika families initially, and was designed around culturally appropriate protocols involving meetings of parent groups to discuss key literacy messages with lead parents in the parents' first languages. Lead teachers and lead parents were trained by School Support Literacy and ESOL advisors in facilitation skills and content material. A key aspect of this programme was its emphasis on a two-way partnership. Parents learnt about school literacy practices: however in addition, teachers were expected to also learn from parents about Pasifika home literacy practices so that they could reconsider the appropriateness of their own teaching programmes and practices for Pasifika students. This programme has since been extended to involve other (non-Pasifika) parent groups.

The results of the evaluation of this project showed that the programme was successful for Pasifika parents. Good relationships with schools were established, parents were educated about literacy and there were positive changes in the ways they supported their children at home. The programme was less successful for other parent groups where it was delivered in its original form, but schools that adapted the material to suit the needs of their different parent groups found it had similar successful outcomes. Eighty percent of schools reported parental involvement had a positive impact on children's opportunity to learn, and 75 percent reported it had a minor positive impact on student's engagement, attitudes, confidence and literacy achievement. However, the data analysis showed that the 'partnership' was in fact predominantly a one-way process of parents learning about school literacy practices, and that further development is necessary for teachers to see their role as participating in a two-way partnership.

### *Home-school Partnership: Numeracy*

This programme was developed from the Home-School Partnership: Literacy programme described above. It is part of an initiative designed to raise achievement for Pasifika and other bi-lingual students by enhancing family and community engagement in their children's learning. In 2006 a pilot was developed by the Ministry of Education to explore the issues around implementing and sustaining a home-school partnership programme in numeracy as an ongoing initiative. The 2006 pilot involved approximately 40 primary schools in six regions coordinated by 15 facilitators. Approximately 40 further schools have been added to the programme in 2007.

The evaluation of the pilot found most of the lead teachers in the case study schools and most of the facilitators considered the programme to be a success in their schools. Similarly, all the parents and lead parents who were interviewed rated the programme as a success. Almost all parents finished the sessions with increased confidence in doing maths with their children. Key factors were identified in the 2006 evaluation as being important for successful implementation of the initiative. These were as follows:

- careful consultation and selection of the lead parent;
- sharing the leadership with the lead parent and supporting the lead team into the role;
- school-wide support from school leadership;
- social and enjoyable community sessions that engage parents;
- maths that is accessible and relates to life; and
- flexibility of the programme to enable each school and community to adapt it to be their own. (Fisher & Neill, 2006)

### *Home–school Partnership: Secondary*

In 2007 NZCER evaluated the Ministry’s Home–School Partnership: Secondary programme, piloted in four schools in 2005, and since then running in a small number of schools. This programme was designed to help secondary schools improve family and community engagement in children’s secondary education and to contribute to the Ministry’s goal of “raising achievement and reducing disparity”. Following the HSP:Literacy model, a team of lead teachers and lead parents work with targeted groups of parents chosen by the school. In five case study schools this work was evaluated. Two of these targeted Assyrian parents who are recent refugee migrants to New Zealand, and three targeted Pacific parent groups. The programme is designed around five modules which form the basis of five parent sessions. The topics are:

- Preparing my child for secondary school (transition to Year 9);
- Supporting children’s learning at secondary school (an introduction to secondary school);
- Roadmap to success (NCEA and learning pathways);
- Finding out about careers (career planning); and
- Choosing a career (understanding the steps to successful career planning).

Findings point to the importance of schools establishing positive relationships with parent groups in the implementation process of this programme.

All of the above recent Ministry of Education partnership initiatives have a focus on learning, and attempt to align home and school practices, and give suggestions for parents on how to support their students’ learning at home. All make use of “lead” parents or “home–school liaison persons” who can communicate with parents in their first language and present ideas in culturally appropriate ways. The partnerships thus have the potential to be strengths-based, and to recognise the unique contributions made by each different “partner”. However, the evaluation of the Home–School Partnership: Literacy points out that teachers are currently not seeing these relationships as being two-way. This is perhaps a signal that the programmes alone are unlikely to result in more equal, collaborative partnerships if they are not accompanied by support for teachers to think differently about the purpose of home–school partnerships. The evaluations of these projects also point to the importance of flexibility in meeting the needs of different groups and the length of time needed to see changes in achievement as a result of the programmes.

## What does all this tell us about enhancing parental involvement?

The projects reviewed here all have some or all of the elements identified in the literature as being important in building successful home-school partnerships. In summary these are as follows:

- Relationships in successful home-school partnerships are collaborative and mutually respectful.
- Successful partnerships are multi-dimensional, and responsive to community needs.
- Successful home-school partnerships are planned for, embedded within whole school development plans, well resourced and regularly reviewed.
- Successful partnerships are goal oriented and focused on learning.
- Effective parental engagement happens largely at home.
- There is timely two-way communication between school and parents.

However, perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this review of evidence, is that very few home-school partnership projects have been evaluated for their impact on student learning. This of course does not mean that the partnerships have not made a difference to student achievement; however we do not as yet have any evidence of the exact nature of the relationship between enhanced parental involvement and student achievement. Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler & Hoover-Dempsey (2005) suggest that parents' motivational beliefs, their perceptions of invitations for involvement from others and how busy they feel they are all influence the ways they become involved in their children's education and that these in turn eventually impact on student learning. Initiatives that are focused on the early stages of parental involvement, such as making parents feel welcome at school, may well be having substantial long term impact in engaging parents without as yet providing data that can be measured in terms of the impact on achievement.

## What do we know about the barriers to developing successful home-school partnerships?

According to the research literature, barriers to parental engagement include:

- parental experience of education;
- parental lack of skills;
- practical issues such as work commitments;
- perceived teacher attitude;
- attitude of the child;
- parents not being interested; and
- the school itself.

A British research project (EPRA)<sup>9</sup> found no clear agreement between teachers, parents and students as to the main barriers to parental engagement. Teachers were likely to cite parents' previous experience of the education

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<sup>9</sup> The Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (EPRA) project was funded by the Department of Education and Skills in England with the aim of trialling new ways of engaging parents in schooling, particularly "hard to reach" parents. The project funded innovative work in more than a hundred secondary schools across England and projects were focused on one or more of the following strands: supporting parents to help their children; personalizing provision for parents as learners; intelligent reporting ('ireporting'); and enhancing pastoral care.

system; students mentioned practical considerations such as parents' work commitments and childcare; and parents saw the schools themselves as the main barrier (Harris & Goodall, 2007). This is interesting in that it points to the need for better two-way communication between the groups.

Anderson and Minke (2007) found that the most important factor influencing whether or not parents became involved in their children's learning was specific teacher invitations. This is important because, although this is potentially a barrier to parental involvement, it is also a factor that schools can control. A number of studies suggest teachers often do not actively promote two-way communication with parents. Jensen (2007) for instance, describes a study that illustrates the difficulties teachers in a university graduate programme in literacy education had in facilitating two-way communication between themselves and families. As part of the course requirements these teachers were required to send out two monthly newsletters to the parents of children in their classes. The newsletters were to: (1) include a description of the literacy events taking place in the classroom and (2) invite parents to share the literacy events that were taking place in their homes. Analysis of the newsletters showed that teachers focused on the classroom programme and made little attempt to find out about the literacy practices taking place in the homes (even though this was a specific objective of the assignment).

An initial analysis of case studies in the "ireporting" strand of the Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (EPRA) project in Britain also suggested that many schools were still seeing their role of giving information to parents rather than a two-way process (Harris & Goodall, 2007).

In another study (in four Sydney schools) of how schools, parents and local communities might work together to support students' learning Hayes and Chodkiewicz (2006) found that whilst all participating schools had made significant efforts to attempt to improve communication with parents, they generally focused on how they could develop the family to support the school, rather than vice versa. They found no initiatives that were based on more equal sharing of agendas, open dialogue between parents and teachers and/or efforts to value and encourage genuine collaboration and partnership.

School parent-teacher evenings are another example of how interaction between school and family are often one way communications. Maclure and Walker (2000) report on a study of "parent-teacher evenings" in five diverse UK secondary schools. Analysis of the parent-teacher interviews showed that the structure of these consultations was very similar across all schools and seemed to confirm a view of teachers as holding the power in the interactions. Parents and teachers appeared to interact with each other from relatively entrenched positions that meant they were unable to "see" the complexity of each others' positions. (Maclure and Walker 2000) argue that parent-teacher interviews are:

... boundary phenomena. They take place at the intersection of two institutions, home and school. It can be argued that the main effect, and possibly purpose, of this conjuncture is to recruit homes to do outreach work for schools, or even to smuggle school culture into the home (Baker and Keogh, 1995). However in requiring homes to render themselves 'visible', schools also, briefly, expose themselves to the critical scrutiny of those on the 'outside'. Parents' evenings are therefore sites where changes to the customary arrangements between schools and homes might be effected. However, precisely because of this, they are also sites where the prospect of change is likely to be quite heavily resisted on both 'sides'. (p.22)

These studies suggest then that opportunity alone is not enough to ensure two-way communication. There needs to be a commitment to this and an understanding of why it is important.

Similarly, Hanafin and Lynch (2002) found that parents at a primary school in a socio-economically disadvantaged area in Ireland felt excluded from participation in decision-making about issues that affected them



and their children's education even though they were interested (and described as such by the teachers) and informed about their children's education. According to the authors the parents in this study knew a great deal more about education than middle-class educators give them credit for. Conversely, middle-class educators have insufficient understanding of the working-class families to whom they provide a service. Hanafin & Lynch say that an examination of interventions, policies, and practices aimed at reducing educational disadvantage reveals an almost total lack of input from the point of view of those who are the focus of the intervention. If they are correct that teachers have insufficient knowledge of some groups within the school, and that these same groups do not have a voice within the school, it seems unlikely the interventions aimed at reducing disparity will meet the needs of the target groups.

To sum up, the most striking finding from this review of evidence of home-school partnerships was the dearth of initiatives that have been evaluated in terms of improved student achievement and how little we still know about exactly *how* parental involvement in their children's education enhances student achievement.

In the next section of this report we describe the seven New Zealand case studies that make up the empirical research component of this project. These case studies illustrate some different ways schools are trying to engage parents in the education of their children in an effort to lift achievement. We knew from the literature that it was unlikely that we would find many case studies with data about improved achievement resulting from home-school partnerships. We therefore decided to try and find out more about how home-school partnerships were viewed by those involved, what the context-specific features were that determined the sorts of partnerships that developed, and whether these partnerships reflected the key features of successful partnerships described in the literature.



## 4. New Zealand case studies

According to the Request for Proposals for this project, the purpose of the empirical research component of the project was to:

...identify successful home-school partnerships within New Zealand primary and secondary schools, focusing on the school's role and responsibilities as well as investigate and analyse the features of the respective partnerships relative to the context within which they operate. (MOE, 2007).

The difficulty with this was that, as we have seen in the literature review, we know very little about what a “successful” home-school partnership actually is. We therefore decided to include a school as an example of a “successful” home-school partnership if the principal thought it was, and it illustrated strategies that might provide “food for thought” for others. The selection of case study schools is discussed in more detail below.

### Selection of case study schools

Various means were used to identify schools that might be interested in participating in this project. Advertisements were placed in the Education Gazette and in a newsletter that NZCER sends out to schools. Approaches were also made to sector groups and researchers used their own networks. The selection criteria we initially used were as follows:

- that the initiatives had been running for at least two years and were embedded in the school practice;
- had an explicit emphasis on raising student achievement, participation, or presence; and
- were supported by data on improvements in student achievement, participation or presence.

However, in practice, the schools responding to our initial approaches did not match these criteria so, in consultation with the Ministry of Education, these criteria were extended to include schools which appeared to have interesting initiatives operating, even where these initiatives were new or without data linking them directly to improved outcomes for student learning.

Seven schools were selected—three low decile primary schools, one high decile primary school (all urban), one Area school, one special school and one kura kaupapa Māori. The schools involved had either developed their own strategies for developing home-school partnerships or had adapted the Ministry of Education home-school partnership model for their situation. We have also included a “mini” case study of a programme being run by a RTLB in a secondary school. In addition we invited schools that expressed interest in being part of this project, but were not included in the case studies, to submit brief summaries of their initiatives to enable us to present a fuller picture of the wide range of initiatives that are operating. A brief overview of these initiatives is attached (see Appendix One).

Case study schools were visited by researchers during term three, 2007. The principal in each school was interviewed and interviews were also held with groups of teachers, parents/whānau and, where appropriate, students. The initial contact with each school was made through the principal, who then organised the involvement of teachers, parents and students. Some of the schools notified their school community about the research and asked for volunteers, while others invited specific people to participate. Schools were also asked to provide any data they had showing how their home–school partnerships were impacting positively on students. Schools were offered a koha in recognition of the time they put into this project.

In the next section we briefly describe each of the case study schools and outline the features of their home–school partnership initiatives, focusing in particular on the contexts within which each has developed.<sup>10</sup>

## **The seven case study schools**

### **School A**

#### *Context*

School A is an urban, decile two, full primary school. According to the TKI website the school has a roll of 224 students. The school’s students are 72 percent Māori, 15 percent Pākehā, eight percent Pasifika and five percent Asian. A bilingual class caters for whānau who wish their children to have a programme that emphasises te reo me ona tikanga (ERO report, 2005).

We included this school in this study mainly because we were interested in how it was using new technologies to enhance parental involvement in their children’s education. However, many of the initiatives in this school are new and still being embedded in the culture of the school.

This school has a great deal of base-line data and so may be in a position to show shifts in achievement when the initiatives have been established in school practice for longer. For example, the principal reported that STAR tests were administered three times a year and that individual student’s results were mapped against the number of home phone contacts there had been.

#### *NZCER data collection*

Group interviews were held with students, whānau and teachers. The student group consisted of five students, representing a range of levels from across the school. There were three participants in the whānau group (one was also a staff member and another was the “whānau liaison person” within the school). The teachers’ group consisted of four staff members representing a range of experiences in terms of length of time at this school, level of seniority, and age of students taught. The principal was interviewed individually.

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the case study schools were self-nominated by the principals and that the principals also selected staff, parents and students for interviews.

## ***Initiatives***

### *The Phone Home Programme:*

This programme was designed to facilitate positive communication around student behaviour and achievement and to improve two-way communication between the home and school. Video capable mobile phones are provided to all teaching staff (as well as the chairperson of the BOT, the office manager, the international student co-ordinator and the caretaker) to make immediate contact with whānau and share “good news” stories about student learning and behaviour. Disruptive behaviour is also reported to whānau immediately.

Teachers are able to broadcast text to whānau members of students in their class. This is useful for reminding them of forthcoming events and making suggestions of ways they can initiate conversations at home about what their children are learning at school. Similarly, parents can communicate easily with the school via text.

### *The School Community Radio Station:*

This initiative is in its early stages. The radio station broadcasts within a 10–15 km radius of the school. According to the principal, the school is aiming to provide a range of programmes such as: Children’s story time; Ask your teacher; Homework helpers; Country music show; Reggae hour; Tainui waiata; Enviro-schools garden time; parenting programmes; and a comedy hour. Students are involved in the running of the radio station. This project aims to build stronger links between school, families and the wider community.

### *Whānau conferences:*

These conferences (which were initiated in term three, 2006) are held each term in week six or seven. Each student sends a personal letter home inviting whānau to attend a conference at school. Conferences are held over two evenings, and whānau can attend at any time that is convenient for them. The conference is conducted solely by the student but the teacher is in the room and available if needed. There are posters and booklets available that cue parents into the sorts of questions to ask the students about their work. The principal reported that in term three this year they had a 98 percent turn out of families at these conferences. Next year it is intended to replace the term one conferences with home visits.

## ***School data linking partnerships to improved achievement***

The school has some data showing improvements in student attendance, reading and mathematics achievement over the period these initiatives have been operating. It is, however, impossible to directly link the home school partnership initiatives with these improvements.

## ***Overall impressions***

The overall impression of the NZCER researchers who visited School A was that some exciting and creative initiatives were being introduced in an effort to enhance the engagement of whānau in students’ learning. These initiatives do not appear as yet to be fully embedded in the culture of the school, although the principal (who was appointed in 2005) clearly has a well-articulated vision for the school and is working hard to implement this. As outlined in the first section of this report, the international research in this area shows that one of the key characteristics of building successful home–school partnerships is that they take *time* and commitment from both partners. Initiatives in this school are still in the early stage of development.

The Phone Home programme was introduced in term two of 2007. Already there is evidence of this programme becoming more focused on learning rather than simply on relationship building, and the communication between school and home is becoming increasingly two-way. Initially the emphasis of the programme was “on catching kids when they’re good” and communicating “good news stories” to the home, both as a means of positive reinforcement of the desired behaviours and of building positive relationships between home and school. According to one student:

When I phone home for doing good things my dad’s really happy to hear about those things and when I get home he praises me more and says how proud he is of me. (Student)

The principal said:

This initiative has empowered my staff to have confidence in dealing with whānau. The kaupapa is about engaging with whānau in an environment that is safe and built on trust and then maintaining and ensuring that the relationship strengthens with every opportunity you can think of when you have those interactions. (Principal)

Teachers are now also using the phones to encourage interactions with whānau around student learning. At an individual level, a phone call may be made to a parent to tell them about specific progress their child has made, for example, a phone call saying:

[Name of child] has transferred his spelling knowledge into his writing. He is able to write the word ‘different’ in his writing without assistance. (Teacher)

Alternatively a teacher may text the families of the whole class with a question for them to ask their children that relates directly to something that is being learnt at school at the moment.

Teachers are expected to log all phone calls and texts and in this way it is possible to see which individual students have had a lot of contacts (and the nature of these contacts). It should theoretically be possible to investigate the extent to which there are patterns linking the number of phone contacts and improvements in student achievement.

An additional benefit of the Phone Home programme that was mentioned by the principal is that, because families value receiving texts from the school, they are much more likely than before to let the school know when their mobile phone number changes. This means it is easier for the school to maintain an up to date record of emergency contact numbers for students (this is particularly important in an area where more families have mobile phones than land lines.) The phones are also being used to improve communication between staff at the school, for instance notifying the school quickly when they are going to be absent.

The whānau conferences which are entirely conducted by students were spoken about positively by all groups interviewed.

The school community radio station was spoken about positively by whānau, teachers and the principal but not mentioned by the students. However this is a very new initiative and at this stage involves only small numbers of students.

### *Context specific features*

At this school the principal was proactive in seeking out opportunities for sponsorship and support for school based initiatives. The school library provides membership to early childhood centres within the community and to whānau members of school students.

Our particular interest in this case study was the use of information technology to reach out into the community. The parents we interviewed told us that the use of technology within this school helped remove barriers based on their own educational experience and provided avenues for them to become more involved in the school. It seemed that mobile phones were being used very effectively to engage whānau and strengthen relationships between school and home. However, for the researchers, the potential of teachers to be available to families 24 hours a day, seven days a week raised questions about whether the boundaries between teachers' work lives and personal lives were becoming blurred and whether they were being expected to take on unsustainable work loads, through expanding roles. Some teachers did talk about mobile phones being one of a number of things that impeded on their time outside work hours although their commitment to positively involve whānau within the school was a high priority. For example, one teacher related how via use of the mobile phone, he occasionally supported a parent to ensure her son would arrive at school on time. Although he acknowledged that this encroached on his personal time, he felt the opportunity to build and/or strengthen his relationships with parents was important.

### *Nature of partnerships*

Interviews with parents indicated that they saw their role in education as being connected to the school's but parents and teachers each had different responsibilities to fulfil. Parents believed that the school's role was to "teach the academics" and that they were there to support the teacher in shaping "successful citizens". Parents felt the home and the school were "on the same wavelength" and had the "same educational goals, expectations, language and behaviour". The principal too felt that home-school partnerships were important in order to show that the school cared and that it was no longer "you and us" and that this in turn could lead to lifting achievement.

### *Summary*

The focus of the initiatives in this case study is to improve communication between home and school. The initiatives are still in the early stages of implementation, but already a change in emphasis is apparent in the Phone Home project, with interactions between school and home becoming more learning focused. This case study provides 'food for thought' as to how schools might use technology to reach whānau who may otherwise be reluctant to become involved in their children's school life.

## **School B**

### *Context*

School B is a decile 8, composite (Year 1–13) school in rural Canterbury. According to the TKI website it has a roll of 263 students. The students are 80 percent Pākehā, 15 percent Māori, and five percent "other" (ERO report, 2007). The school has a junior school (Year 1–6) of its own but also enrolls students from 2 other local contributing primary schools at Year 7, and from a full primary at Year 9. Traditionally a number of students leave the area at Year 9 to go to boarding school. This school is in an area of relatively high mobility but

anecdotally this appears to be reducing as the dairying company endeavours to find off-season work for workers within the area. When the current principal arrived in 2005, he and the Board consulted with the local community about the strengths and weaknesses of the school. The principal says it was clear that stronger links between the school and families were wanted and the following strategies were written into the school's strategic plan (2006–2008):

- develop communication between the home and school and between the school and community;
- develop the relationships between staff, students and parents; and
- look for opportunities to promote the family atmosphere offered by a Year 1–13 school.

According to the school's ERO report (2007):

Parents and the community are regularly informed about school developments and student activities. The principal and senior managers use a variety of effective communication approaches. For example, a weekly newsletter acknowledges student achievements and provides important information and advice. The principal is involved in the wider community. He and the board hold district meetings to consult parents. Parents feel welcome at the school and are promptly informed or involved if issues arise concerning their children. Students benefit from close links with a number of local businesses and organisations. These provide practical learning experiences and the opportunity to gain qualifications. This ongoing communication and involvement with the community is having a positive impact on the learning environment in the school.

We chose this school as one of our case studies because we were interested in exploring whether there were characteristics of successful home–school partnerships in a rural school that might be different from those found in urban schools. As this school is a composite school, catering for Years 1–13, it also potentially provided us with the opportunity to explore whether different strategies might be more or less effective for engaging parents of students of different ages.

Most of the initiatives in this school are less than two years old but developing stronger links between the school and families is now embedded in the school's strategic planning. At this stage, several of the initiatives appear to focus on improving relationships and communication. In the school newsletter the principal states:

We see this [home–school partnerships] as a key strategy in our bid to raise student achievement and most if not all of our actions are underpinned by this concept. (School newsletter week ending 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2007).

This school does not currently have robust data showing improvements in student achievement, participation or presence although the 2007 ERO report asserts that the initiatives are having a positive impact on the learning environment in the school.

### ***NZCER data collection***

Group interviews were carried out with teachers, parents and students. The principal was interviewed individually. The principal appeared to have thought carefully about the selection of interviewees, to ensure we were given a range of different perspectives.

The teachers' group consisted of the Assistant Principal (who is responsible for discipline), the PE teacher, an English teacher (new to the school this year), and a junior school teacher who had been at the school for more than ten years. Four parents were interviewed, including one who was new to the school this year, and one who is a Board member. The parents between them had students at all levels of the school. Five students were interviewed. They ranged in age from 10 to 15 years and the group included boys and girls, high achievers and students with challenging behaviours.



**Initiatives:**

*Vertical form groups (Y7–13):* This initiative aims to encourage relationship building between teacher, student and family by a student staying with the same form teacher right through their time in the senior school. Siblings are placed in different form groups. This initiative was implemented this year.

*Learning conferences:* Parents and students meet with the form teacher for up to 30 minutes to check progress against goals set earlier in the year and share assessment information. The form teacher (from Year 7 up) collects any necessary information from other subject teachers. This initiative was implemented this year. Again its purpose is to encourage relationship building between the form teacher, student and family, and to facilitate discussions based on student learning.

*Discipline system:* Dialogue is developed between home and school at an early stage if there are any concerns with a student's behaviour. Positive behaviour is also recognised. When a student gains 20 "strives" (cards that are issued when a student is "caught being good") a letter goes home thanking parents for their assistance in developing their child into a "model student". This initiative recognises the shared responsibility family and school have for socialisation of the child.

*Newsletter:* This goes home weekly and recognises student achievement, gives advance notice of forthcoming events, outlines relevant school planning, and gives "learning hints" for parents to help support their students.

*Handbook:* This is issued to every family on enrolment and then annually. Everything a family needs to know about the school is included—strategic plan, contact numbers, routines, PTA, staff, calendar of events etc. The school is about to survey parents for their views on the usefulness of this resource.

*Pastoral care meetings:* Every Thursday morning staff review the progress of a group of students. Where students are not achieving either the form teacher, the Assistant Principal or the Deputy Principal make contact with them and/or their parents to discuss the issues.

***School data linking partnerships to improved achievement***

All the initiatives at this school were relatively new and there is no hard achievement data linking them to improved outcomes for students. According to the principal NCEA results for the school improved last year but he was quite clear that class sizes, particularly in the secondary area, are so small that it is not useful to compare different cohorts of students. The school is currently setting up a longitudinal record of achievement for each child and when this is in place the principal thinks it should be possible to map changes in an individual's progress against the introduction of various interventions, professional development etc.

***Overall impression***

The home-school partnership concept is embedded in the strategic planning of this school. There is a wide range of (mainly new) strategies in place that are together intended to strengthen the links between families and the school. At this stage many of these strategies are focused on improving communication between school and home and on developing positive relationships.

The handbook and the newsletter are clearly designed to disseminate information to parents. Obviously neither of these communication tools is a home-school partnership in itself, but they do provide families with information that could help them become more involved in the school. The handbook simply gives information about the school, but the newsletter also provides information on how parents can support students' learning at home and

celebrates the achievement of individual students. Parents mentioned the newsletter when asked what the school did to facilitate home-school partnerships. They felt that it was useful in that it informed all parents what was happening in both the junior school and the senior school and by, bringing “both sides together”, helped build a sense of belonging to the school as a whole. Parents said the newsletter was the most effective communication tool that the school had but it was not mentioned by teachers or students. (The handbook was not mentioned by any group, nor was the pastoral care system.)

The discipline system and the pastoral care meetings involve communication with parents that is potentially two-way. The communication is initiated by the school but parents are invited to talk with the school. These strategies recognise the joint responsibilities of school and home in the education of students and the importance of gaining a holistic picture of the child. They are about communication but also about building relationships. The emphasis in the discipline system on acknowledging positive behaviours was seen by parents as particularly effective in engaging both students and parents. Students confirmed that the school (often the principal himself) rings home with both good and bad news about behaviour. The teacher group interviewed felt that it was better if at all possible to contact parents about discipline issues by phone, rather than by writing notes as this encouraged two-way discussion. They felt it was important to involve parents as early as possible when there was an issue with a child’s behaviour. The Assistant Principal reported making between three and 12 discipline-related phone calls to families each week.

The vertical form groups were established specifically to facilitate relationships between parents and teachers, and students and teachers. The principal believed that a student staying with one form teacher from Year 7 until they left school would encourage the teacher to really get to know the student as an individual and would also make it easier for the parent. In the interviews, the students said the effectiveness of the vertical form group was largely dependent on the form teacher and the form leader. In the words of one student (who was also a form leader) when it works well “it feels like a little family”. One of the teachers interviewed had previously experienced vertical form groups in an urban secondary school and felt they were more effective here as the students had contact with each other outside school as well. The parents were positive about the vertical form groups too and felt it was important that siblings were in separate form groups (even though this increased the number of form teachers a parent had to build relationships with) as this provided the children with time away from each other and provided more leadership opportunities.

The learning conferences contribute towards relationship building but their focus is on the learning of individual students and the home and school working together to support the student’s learning. This strategy would appear to have the most direct links to potentially lifting student achievement, although the rest are all likely to contribute to the establishment of a school culture where such collaborations are possible.

Parents were generally more positive about the learning conferences for older students than for younger ones. Parents felt that having students present at these conferences added consistency, as parents, students and teachers were all hearing the same messages. Parents said that the conversation initiated at the learning conferences had carried on at home afterwards between parents and children. They felt it was particularly important knowing what goals the students had set for their learning because this allowed them to follow this up at home. In the words of one parent “That’s where the partnership comes in—backing up the school at home.” Parents also spoke of the importance of knowing exactly “where the student is in their learning” so they know where to focus their efforts to help at home. Students’ opinions of the effectiveness of learning conferences were more mixed. They felt the usefulness of these conferences was dependent on the form teacher’s willingness to collect relevant information

from the subject teachers. The teachers interviewed were positive about the conferences saying that they encouraged children and parents to take joint responsibility for learning.

The school had surveyed staff, parents and students about the conferences earlier in the year, as this was a new initiative. All of the junior school staff and 80 percent of the staff from Years 7—13 thought the information given to students and parents at these interviews was useful and would help students achieve. Seventy eight percent of parents and eighty percent of students agreed with this. Seventy five percent of the staff (ninety one percent of junior school staff and forty percent of senior school staff) felt they knew the student better as a result of the conferences. Eighty three percent of parents felt they knew the form teacher better as a result of the conferences.

### ***Context specific features***

The specific context of this school has some implications for home–school partnerships. Teachers are seen and known in this small rural community. (This came through in all interviews). Parents thought that in such a close community it was possible for parents to take an active role in encouraging other parents to become involved. One parent explained that because the extra-curricula activities available to students in rural areas were less varied than in urban areas, families tended to be involved in the same activities e.g. the rugby club and cricket club. This in turn means families have more interaction with each other and so can influence each other to become more involved in school. All the groups also felt the small size of the school is helpful in building relationships—all groups thought that students were known as individuals.

Barriers to parental engagement in rural areas, identified by the principal, were geographic isolation which makes attending evening meetings or dropping in to the school informally difficult for some parents, and lack of cell phone coverage.

Interviews with parents indicated that parents' involvement at school is to some extent influenced by the age of their children. They said that when their children were in the junior school they were much more likely to “pop into school” and to help out in class. They also felt they had a better idea of what their children were expected to do for homework. Parents felt that they had less input into their children's education as they got older, so that strategies that explicitly encourage parental involvement at the secondary level are especially important.

We have that trust thing (in the senior school). We send our kids there for six hours a day and I'm not going over there. I come to the junior side much more. (parent)

Teachers also felt school was more threatening to parents as their students moved into the secondary area.

### ***Nature of partnerships***

All groups interviewed felt there was good two-way communication in the school and that the phone was an effective means of communication. The students felt that their families and the school valued similar things although they did not think that their parents necessarily understood the way things are done at school. Parents saw their roles and the school's as complementary but different. Parents saw the teachers as the educators and that their role was to support them by reinforcing learning at home and by ensuring the children were “ready to learn”. Parents felt they were ultimately responsible for their children and this meant it was important they were given accurate information by the school about their children's levels of achievement. They felt their involvement in the school, showed their children they valued education and that they cared about them. The principal too felt that

home-school partnerships were important in order to show children that people cared about them and that this in turn could lead to lifting achievement.

### **Summary**

In this school the home-school partnership concept is embedded in strategic planning. There is a wide range of strategies in place that together are intended to strengthen the links between families and the school. This case study is interesting in that it illustrates how a commitment to engaging parents in their children's education can be addressed through a range of school practices, rather than through a specific home-school partnership programme. It also highlights the need to think carefully about ways of engaging the parents of secondary school students.

## **School C**

### **Context**

School C is a decile 2 special school, situated in Northland. The school services the Tai Tokerau region and operates from five physical locations. According to the TKI website the school has a total roll of 74 students. According to information provided by the school, its students, who have intellectual disabilities and related physical challenges, range in age from 5–21 years. A number of students are non-verbal and many have difficulties in social and community situations. Many of the students are verified under the Ministry of Education's Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS). The students are drawn from a large geographical area and a range of socio-economic backgrounds. About half of the students on the roll are Māori.

The school operates on a trans-disciplinary model. This is described on the school website as a model that aims to:

... pool all ideas, knowledge and skills; share and exchange all information; value and respect different perspectives; listen to what each other has to offer; and empower families/whānau and all team members."

Special Education Assistants, teacher aides and therapists work alongside the teachers to provide a holistic education for the students.

According to the ERO report (2004):

Programmes are carefully individualised and teachers ensure that, wherever possible, students' families and caregivers actively contribute to programme development, implementation and assessment.

We chose this school as one of our case studies because it has a very strong emphasis on the school working in partnership with families. We were interested in exploring how some of the strategies being used to involve families in this specific context might be transferable to "mainstream" schools. Specifically we were interested in the ways this school used new technologies to enhance parental engagement.

### **NZCER data collection**

Group interviews were carried out both with the Digital Imaging in Special Education project team<sup>11</sup> (known as the DISE team) and with four parents/whānau members. Two of the parents were BOT members, one had a child

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<sup>11</sup> This team consists of the principal, a lead teacher, a facilitator, a parent liaison teacher and a technician.

at the base site and the other three had children at other sites. The parent/whānau group consisted of one father, two mothers and one aunt.

The principal was also interviewed individually but in this case study no students were interviewed as it was the principal's view that an interview with an unknown person would not be a positive experience for them.

### *Initiative*

The DISE (Digital Imaging in Special Education) Project began in 2005. It is a Digital Opportunities Project, a joint venture between the Ministry of Education, HP New Zealand, Macromedia, EdTech, and the school. The project focuses on the use of audio and visual technologies as tools to enhance students' learning opportunities. One of its aims is "to transfer best practices between home and school" and as such it has a focus on home-school partnerships. It is a three year project and consists of three strands: digital diaries, socialisation and desensitisation.

*Digital diaries* involve visual and audio records of students' achievements and skill development. They aim to show progress during the year (and in the case of transition students, what they like and can do). There are four strands to this section of the project: communication; physical; self management; transition. Each digital diary focuses on the IEP goal relating to one of these strands.

*Socialisation* involves the production and repeated viewing of video clips that show the student appropriate behaviour in a specific setting.

*Desensitisation* involves the production and repeated viewing of video clips to prepare students to deal with situations that are potentially distressing for them, e.g. visits to the hospital.

Now in its third year, this project is led by a project team of five, consisting of the principal, a lead teacher, a facilitator, a parent liaison teacher and a technician. Each team member has clearly defined roles and responsibilities. This project is being constantly evaluated, and adaptations such as the introduction of regular team meetings are made as necessary.

### *School data linking initiatives to improved student learning*

As the progress of one student (or cohort of students) at this school cannot meaningfully be compared with that of other students or cohorts it is not possible to provide hard data that link increases in student achievement to these initiatives. However, this project seems likely to add to student learning in two ways. Firstly it allows greater consistency between home and school practices. The focus of much of the learning in this setting is on what could be considered life skills rather than academic skills, and so coherence between what is being learnt at home and at school is particularly important. Many of these students also have multiple caregivers which add further challenges to maintaining consistency between settings. Secondly the DVDs serve to raise expectations. Parents and caregivers are provided with "concrete" evidence of what students can do in other situations. The DVDs also capture small changes in what students can do which might otherwise be overlooked.

### *Overall impressions*

Both the teachers and the parents/whānau group were unanimous in their view that parents of students involved in the project were much more involved in their students' education than they had been prior to the start of the

programme. Some staff felt this was a direct result of the digital medium. As they put it, “the medium allows teachers to avoid jargon—it removes barriers to communication”, “seeing is believing”, “it is a window into the classroom”. The DVDs allow parents to see small incremental changes over time, they provide a way of sharing what a student can do with the wider family (and multiple caregivers), they help provide consistency of expectation between home and school, and they give students “voice”.

Other staff thought the increased involvement of parents was more a result of the introduction of the role of a liaison teacher. The liaison teacher is a trained teacher who knows the school culture well. She has the confidence of both parents and teachers and as such has a critical role as a “go-between”. In some cases, for example, it was said that it was easier for parents to give feedback to the liaison teacher rather than directly to classroom teachers. The liaison teacher also evaluates the DISE programme with parents, encouraging them to say what worked well, what would have been better, and what sorts of adaptations they would like for their children. This ensures parent voice is heard.

The parents felt the DVDs were an effective way of communicating with families about their children’s learning. They too said that the digital images allowed them to see small incremental developments that they may have otherwise missed, that the DVDs were useful in helping the extended family (and other caregivers) look after the child, and helped raise expectations. Unlike the teachers though, this group saw the role of the liaison teacher as “the icing on the cake” rather than integral to the success of the project. (The parents interviewed were obviously very involved in the school so it is likely that their need for a liaison teacher could be less than that of other parents in the school).

The parents said that the school fostered parent interaction and that there was a huge amount of contact, even without the DISE project. All four parents were positive about the school’s system of using notebooks on a daily basis to communicate between teachers and family. They all saw the notebooks as a vehicle for two-way communication. The parents said they felt the school knew their goals and aspirations for their children and their involvement in children’s IEPs ensured this.

### ***Context specific features***

Many features of School C are unique to its specific context, yet ‘mainstream’ schools may be able to adapt some of these practices to engage parents more fully in their children’s learning. One of the benefits of the DVDs, that was mentioned by both parents and staff, was that they provided both parties with evidence of students’ progress and achievements. This provision of “concrete” evidence could then be used to facilitate in-depth focused discussions about the student’s learning. DVDs being sent into the homes could also provide those families who cannot easily come into the school a window into their children’s life at school. The trans-disciplinary model this school operates from, may also be of interest to other schools as they consider their roles and responsibilities and ways of engaging families in students’ learning.

Funding is currently provided for the DISE project, but the principal spoke of sustainability concerns once the Digital Opportunities funding is withdrawn. Other funding options are currently being explored as the principal believes that the provision of both a liaison teacher and technician is critical to the success of the project.

### ***Nature of partnerships***

The parents interviewed at this school felt the relationship between the home and school is different when children have special needs. The parents said they were more protective of their children with “special needs” than they

were with their other children—in particular they felt they had to advocate for their “special needs” child. Like parents in other schools, they felt that their role in their child’s education was to provide support and try to work on behaviours to get students ready to learn. The parents saw their main emphasis as being on health and well-being. The parents felt the school held the ultimate power when making educational decisions about their children, but that their views were considered.

### *Summary*

Like School A, this case study illustrates how technology can be used to facilitate parents’ involvement in their children’s learning. In the context of a special school, consistency between home and school is particularly important. This “seamlessness” between home and school is becoming increasingly important in the “mainstream” environment too with the emphasis on life long learning in the new curriculum document. Thus this case study provides “food for thought” for all educators.

## School D

### *Context*

School D is an urban, decile 9 contributing school. According to the TKI website it has a roll of 133 students. The ERO report (Dec 2006) describes the school as drawing on a culturally and socio-economically diverse community, and as being “community-oriented.” Fifty five percent of the roll are Pākehā, 17 percent are Māori, ten percent are Asian, nine percent are Pasifika, four percent African and five percent “other European”.

Parents are actively involved in a variety of volunteer work within the school. Sound communication strategies and regular community dialogue ensure that the community is well informed about students’ learning and achievement. Good links to the local community, organisations and individuals are evident. Active networking with the local cluster of schools and early childhood centres continues to enhance achievement and continuity for [name of school] students. (ERO, 2006)

We included this school as one of our case-studies, partly because it was one of the very few high decile schools that volunteered for this research project, and partly because the school’s involvement of parents in the delivery of curriculum seemed an interesting idea to explore. The initiatives in this school have been in place for at least two years and are embedded in the school practice. Seventy one percent of parents completed a survey that was used to inform the development of the school’s strategic plan 2007–2009. This plan includes actions such as liaising with the navy to better support navy families, maintaining regular contact with preschools within the area, and finding opportunities to develop and maintain relationships with community organisations. The principal reported that when recruiting new staff she actively sought teachers who would support the school’s philosophy of involving parents in the school. There are data showing high levels of achievement at the school, but these cannot be directly attributed to the initiatives described.

### *NZCER data collection*

Group interviews were held with teachers, parents and students. The parents’ group consisted of two Pākehā mothers, one Japanese mother and one Pākehā father. All were actively involved in programmes in school, and all had been invited by the school to take part in the interview. The school informed the parent community of NZCER’s project through the newsletter, and included our interview questions so that any parent who was

interested could participate. (There were three responses to the newsletter). The teachers' group consisted of four teachers, representing all levels of the school and the student group consisted of two boys and two girls whose parents had varying levels of involvement in the school.

The principal was interviewed by phone prior to the NZCER researcher visiting the school as she was unable to be on site on the day of our visit.

### ***Initiatives***

#### *A junior language programme*

This programme targets children who are not achieving at the "expected" level. The Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTL) trains parents to run the programme which includes phonics, oral language and fine motor skills. An occupational therapist is also involved.

#### *Parent help*

Parent help is used extensively in the library, in the school gardens, and in enrichment programmes (including debating, Spanish language, and maths). Parents also contribute to "Learning Pathways". (See below)

#### *"Learning Pathways"*

Learning Pathways is the name of the school's integrated studies programme. It draws extensively on the skills and knowledge of families and others in the community, as it attempts to embed students' learning in authentic contexts. Each term a different topic is studied. Each topic consists of a combination of explicit teaching and independent investigations. At the end of each term parents are invited to a "Communication of Learning" event. According to the principal the school gets close to 100 percent parental turnout at these events.

#### *Parent /teacher/ student interviews*

On the first day of the school year students and their parents are timetabled for meetings with the class teacher. The purpose of this interview is to begin to establish a relationship between the family and the child's teacher. It is an opportunity to collaboratively set goals for the students for the year.

### ***School data linking partnerships to improved achievement***

Many of the initiatives outlined above have a focus on raising student achievement. Some of the initiatives, such as the one involving parents in teaching extension groups, mean that the school can offer opportunities to students that are over and above the "normal" programme. In her interview, the principal talked about the difficulties in linking achievement data directly with initiatives that aim to increase parental engagement. In this school parents are particularly involved in "learning pathways", the school's integrated studies programme. Assessing the impact of parental involvement on student achievement is particularly difficult here as there is no clear set of easily measurable learning outcomes. The 2006 ERO report however makes the following statements:

The school's values are evident in practice showing that staff, students and the community are united in 'together navigating for success'.

Good learning and achievement is evident in areas such as literacy, numeracy and thinking skills.

Students are engaged in learning and well motivated to learn.

In relation to participation and engagement the principal reported two "stand downs" in 2003–2004 and no significant behavioural issues since. Parents commented on how well behaved students at school were. All students interviewed appeared very positive about school.



### *Overall impression*

A high level of parental involvement seems to be a firmly embedded part of the culture of this school.

Before our visit, the principal published our parental interview questions in the school newsletter and invited parents to respond. This gave parents other than those interviewed the opportunity to have their voice heard. In the introduction to the questions in the newsletter, the principal wrote:

We encourage parents to be involved in their education as time allows them. Research tells us that the more this can happen the better the chances are that their children's learning outcomes will be improved.

At [name of school] we have parents involved as teacher aides, CWSA tutors, parent helpers for lunch schemes, garden design, sports coaching, library work, school trips and as judges at various competitions. All parents, are of course, part of their children's education at home and increasingly at school through Learning Pathways, the inquiry based learning that takes place throughout the school each day. (Newsletter, 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2007).

At this school teachers believe home-school partnerships had a high priority, "It's part of the job. It's what we are here to do. It is not an add on—it's integral to what we do". One teacher said she didn't think she could go back to teach in a school with a "closed door" policy. She said the open door policy had really improved her teaching because she was constantly justifying why she was doing things in particular ways. The principal also echoed that involving parents in learning made you examine your own assumptions. Teachers felt their attitude towards parents was a really critical factor in their success in engaging parents. As one put it, "If staff are defensive, parents are defensive".

The parents interviewed all said that they felt valued by the school and that the attitudes of the principal and the teachers encouraged them to offer to help. They said "you know you're wanted" but also that "It's OK if you have only got a little bit of time to spare." They liked the way the level of involvement was left up to the parent. All of the students interviewed were able to identify a variety of ways in which their families were involved with the school.

Many of the ways parents are involved in this school amount to being volunteers. Students said parental involvement helped the teachers because they were busy and meant they had more opportunities than they would otherwise have. They did not however think having the parents involved in school helped their learning at home and there were mixed opinions as to whether or not they liked having their parents at school.

Parents talked a lot about enrichment programmes (of the four parents interviewed one ran Spanish, one debating, one maths sessions and the fourth had been involved in Learning Pathways as a nutrition "expert"). All said they felt really valued by the school and that the school used their skills well to enhance programmes. Teachers also emphasised these parent run aspects of the programme. They saw the parents as offering opportunities to the children that they could not otherwise have. "Some initiatives add breadth, some depth, some remedial support for kids that need it—it benefits the kids and the parents feel valued".

In relation to Learning Pathways parents said knowing what the topics were in advance allowed them to capitalise on incidental learning at home. The principal said giving parents advance notice also allowed them to arrange work commitments to fit in involvement with school. Junior teachers said it was obvious parents were talking about Learning Pathways with their children at home because they (children) brought new information to class. The middle school teacher felt that children were so engaged in their learning they were keen to tell parents what

they had been doing (she based this opinion on overheard conversations outside the classroom at the end of the day). She felt that when students were engaged in their learning they engaged their parents, and the more engaged parents were, the more engaged students were, so there was a spiralling effect.

The junior language programme was only mentioned by the principal and teachers in the interview. The teachers involved felt that as well as benefitting the students involved there were positive spinoffs for parents involved when it came to working with their own preschoolers.

The interviews at the beginning of the year were not mentioned by students, but both parents and teachers saw them as an important way of encouraging two-way communication. Teachers saw these as an opportunity to gauge the level of likely home support, and according to one teacher to find out the little “niggly things” that parents might not consider important enough to write down but were nevertheless helpful to know. It was also an opportunity to observe the parent and child relating to each other. It was seen as a way of “opening the door” for communication. (These interviews are timetabled through the day and routinely achieve 100 percent turn out).

### ***Context specific features***

This school’s specific context has some implications for home–school partnerships in general. This is a small school in an area where there is a strong sense of community. (One of the parents interviewed had attended the school as a child). The small size of the school is helpful in building relationships—all groups thought this helped, in that all students were known as individuals. The teachers also reported that the parents encouraged each other to get involved as they had contact with each other in the community. The principal said that about half the parents dropped their children off at school in the morning and that this also increased the opportunities for interactions between parents and school and the between the parents themselves. Parents felt it was easier to be involved at the primary school level than at the secondary level, partly because they felt their children did not want them to be involved as they got older.

### ***Nature of partnerships***

Parents felt their children’s education was ultimately their responsibility and it was up to them to support teachers and in the words of one parent ensure children didn’t “slip through the cracks”. They felt they had a role in helping the school provide opportunities for students that they might not otherwise have. They were concerned about the teachers’ work load and were willing to help out where possible. The parents interviewed thought that it was the principal’s role to decide what was taught in the school and how, and that their role was to give support. One parent said “You know the boundaries and that is good.” Even so parents still felt it was a two-way partnership. They said that the school’s “open door” culture was strong and that the principal was very visible and easily approachable. Seeing her on road patrol or out in the playground made it easy to talk to her.

The principal told us that when she started at the school she had to actively seek out parental help, but now some parents were actively seeking opportunities for involvement. She gave the example of parents initiating something they wanted to do in the school in relation to improving gardens. The principal felt it was important to communicate with parents in a variety of ways. The weekly newsletter is on-line (although none of the parents we interviewed accessed it this way) and the school website is being developed to be more interactive. Some teachers routinely communicate with parents via email. Although the school holds regular parent evenings for curriculum-related topics, these had not been particularly successful in attracting parents, despite the fact that they had been initiated as a result of parental requests. One teacher said she had found late meetings (starting at 8pm) were better attended in that they allowed parents to get children fed and settled at home first. The principal also suggested

meetings from 2.30 to 3.15 were good for parents of new entrants. These examples illustrate the school's flexibility in trying to meet the needs of different groups of parents.

As well as raising achievement the principal felt that by encouraging parents to be more involved in their children's learning, the school was often helping improve the relationship between parents and children. In her view "part of being a good parent is being involved with your children—we have to create those opportunities". She gave the example of when parents come into school as "experts" talking about aspects of their professional lives as part of the "learning pathways" their own children often learn things about their parents' lives that they were previously unaware of.

### **Summary**

In this case study, a critical factor in the success of the home-school partnership initiatives seemed to be the teachers' attitudes. The staff at this school are clearly committed to working closely with parents and saw this partnership being beneficial to their own teaching as well as to student learning. This case study illustrates the importance of being clear about the purpose of partnerships and the roles of the partners.

## **School E**

### **Context**

School E is a decile 1, urban, contributing school, which is part of the Tamaki Achievement Pathways initiative. According to the TKI website the school has a roll of 155 students. The ethnic composition of the school is 31 percent Māori; five percent Pākehā, 29 percent Tongan; 12 percent Samoan; 13 percent Niuean; six percent Cook Island; four percent "other". (ERO report, 2006).

The school's strategic plan encompasses the three vital outcomes of the Ministry of Education's Schooling Strategy 2005–2010 which includes "Children's learning is nurtured by families and whānau". The school's strategic plan (2007–2010) says parents, families and the community will be committed to:

- involvement in their children's learning and activities;
- supporting the school's goals;
- participating in consultation processes; and
- engaging in discussions around supporting student achievement.

We chose this school as one of our case studies because we were interested in looking at how schools working together in an area could enhance parental engagement. Another reason for choosing this school was that it had previously participated in the Ministry of Education funded home-school partnership in literacy programme, and had since adapted that model customising it to better meet the needs of its community. This school is one of a cluster of local schools that are all involved in home-school partnership initiatives. It is a feeder school for the local intermediate, whose pupils then go on to the local college—both of these schools have home-school partnership programmes operating. School E is also part of a 3 year Pasifika School Community and Parent Liaison Project (PSCPL), involved in promoting successful transitions between early childhood and primary, and primary and intermediate schools.

### ***NZCER data collection***

Group interviews were carried out with: Senior Management (Principal and a lead teacher in the home-school initiatives); teachers: (11 staff including RTLBs, support staff, and two student teachers and the principal); seven students (from Years 4–6) and seven parents (plus the principal and staff representative on the BOT). Planning documentation and achievement data were also provided by the school.

#### ***Initiatives:***

##### *Transitioning children successfully from ECE to school:*

A PSCPL (Pasifika School Community and Parent Liaison Project) liaison advisor was appointed to broker the relationship between the parents of new entrants and the teacher. She visits the homes of new entrants. Among other things she talks the parents through a questionnaire about where the family is from, who is living in the home, and what resources and routines are in the home. She will translate if necessary. A newsletter in different languages is also sent home welcoming the families of new entrants to school.

##### *Parent Support Group:*

A teacher involved in the home-school partnership initiatives has been trying to start a parent support group. A parents' room, with couches and toys for younger children, has been set up at the school so parents can meet informally and feel more part of the school.

##### *Home-school partnership sessions:*

Meetings are held once a term. The main focus of these has been to scaffold parents' learning and understanding about their children's learning. These meetings have covered a range of topics including:

- supporting children at home with reading;
- school expectations for student reading achievement and explaining how books are levelled;
- how 3-way conferences work (this involved role plays and teaching about how to question students about their learning); and
- the pressures of being a parent (this involved a guest speaker— a social worker who is Tongan)

##### *Three-way conferences*

These were set up to replace parent interviews and involve students taking a more active role by talking about their learning. Parents, teachers and students all contribute in this forum to understand the progress students have made in their learning, what next steps and goals are to be aimed for, and how parents could support this at home.

### ***School data linking partnerships to improved achievement***

The principal has been collecting a great deal of data since she arrived at the school in 2005. Not all of the data were to do with achievement, and it would be difficult to estimate how much was due to the HSP interventions, because there were multiple interventions occurring at the school through the Tamaki Achievement Pathway initiatives. However, her interview reveals that the school is making some significant shifts in a number of ways:

***Presence:*** The principal reported that in term two 2007, 87 percent of students attended school for 80 percent or more of the time it was open. (This compares with 75 percent eighteen months before).

***Achievement:*** AsTTle reading test mean scores indicate that between August 2006 and August 2007 students in Years 4, 5 and 6 have made accelerated progress.

### *Overall impressions*

Over the last two years the school has worked on a number of fronts with whānau in a multi-pronged approach to try to improve the engagement of families in the learning of their children. Working on developing more positive relationships between students and teachers and teachers and parents, was an important first step before learning could become the focus of these initiatives. The principal explained:

It's not just the HSP meetings and strategies in isolation—its all the other strategies together—its about being empathetic with the families, its how we acknowledge them (smile—parents are frightened), its the school culture, it's the environment, its the relationships, everyone has huge respect for each other. There has been a big move in making parents feel welcome in the last few years here. (Principal)

The home-school partnership evening sessions that this school runs are adapted from the Ministry of Education HSP: Literacy model. (This school was originally part of this project).

The parents were enthusiastic about the impact of these sessions, and the children all reported changes in the way their families interacted with them in relation to their learning. Some parents even said these home-school partnership evening sessions had been life-changing for them. They spoke about their own failure at school and negative attitudes, about their hopes and aspirations for their children and their commitment to change their low achievement. They appeared very appreciative of the attention and help they were getting. They described in detail the things they now do at home, compared to what they used to do.

Its opened a lot of doors to the parents in the community—I didn't think I needed to be involved and that was a surprise. It has brought me closer to my son—at home we didn't have that communication thing going—especially talking about learning—now I'm talking with my son and all the questions you are supposed to talk with my son. Really get that language out of him. I was surprised at the language and words that came out of him—he used phrases like 'learning goals'. It brought me closer to the teachers—I'm very shy. It helped a lot in our home. (Parent)

Everything the parents reported matched with what the children said. The children reported changes in the way their families asked them questions about school and took an interest in their work. They said that families helped them with homework, read books to them, made them turn the TV off and played games with them. The students were all extremely positive and said all these changes were the result of home-school partnership sessions. The principal reported that about thirty parents attended HSP evening sessions.

The three-way interviews were considered by teachers to be effective. They saw them as a way to deepen their relationship with the students and their families and talk to them on a personal level. Teachers said three way conferences were more useful than portfolios because there is less on-going work—just the initial preparation. They felt the focus on questioning at the HSP parent evenings had contributed to the success of these three-way interviews.

One teacher expressed the view that three-way conferences were hard on the children whose parents did not come. This teacher had organised interviews with another adult (support staff) in the school instead of the parent for these children. This strategy allowed the children still to share goals with another adult. However, some of the parents who didn't come to the three-way conference the first time came the next time. The principal reported a 50 percent turnout of parents in 2006 but said that in 2007 they had a 70 percent turn-out. She thought this was as a result of children putting "pressure on parents".

Although the three-way conferencing seems to be going well, the parent support group seems to have floundered. A possible reason for this is that the school set up the parents' group because that is what they thought the parents wanted, but the parents themselves were not part of that decision-making process. At the parents' focus group interview one of the parents talked about his illiteracy, so the principal suggested adult literacy classes could be something that the parent support group could run.

### ***Context specific features***

The interviews with parents suggested that the whole community working together on the common goal of lifting achievement was effective. One parent was able to link things he had learnt from the college's home-school partnership evenings with the primary school's. The Pasifika School Community and Parent Liaison Project appeared to have had an impact on the number of Pasifika children attending early childhood centres. The principal reported that when they started the project only 30 percent of Pasifika children went to ECE and now 90 percent do. This seems to have the potential to help lift achievement levels in the primary school, especially if strong links between the ECE centres and the school are developed and maintained. Principals from the local schools and Early Childhood centres met and talked to each other, so there are similarities in how these schools are responding to the issues of involving parents. "Outreach workers" appeared to be being used effectively.

### ***Nature of partnerships***

There did not however appear yet to be a two-way relationship of equality between the school and whānau in this school's HSP model: rather it seemed to be driven by the school management (the principal and lead teacher). In the original Literacy programme, the Board members took on first language speaker roles, but in the present HSP programme, this does not appear to be a priority. The dominant partner in this relationship with the most clearly defined roles appears to be the teachers. This approach seems to stem from the view that parents are not ready to take on a leadership role: as the principal put it:

...we are scaffolding success for our parents. That empowerment may come later, but at the moment the structure needs to be driven by management. (Principal)

The home-school partnership initiatives in this school seem to be based on the school's perception of the parents' needs. There was no evidence in the interviews that the school was consulting parents about what they wanted. The principal appeared to have a non-judgemental, but pragmatic view of the parents' capacity, and seemed optimistic about change and hopeful about positive outcomes as a result of the HSP interventions.

The parents we interviewed said that they were ultimately responsible for their children's education and that their role was to support the school. They felt that they needed information from the school to be able to support their children adequately (and were appreciative of the information they were getting from HSP evenings and three-way conferences). They emphasised how different education in New Zealand was from their experience in the "Islands".

### ***Summary***

This case study illustrates the importance of relationship building and dissemination of information especially when working with families whose language, cultural practices, and experiences of education are different from those of the teachers. It emphasises the important role played by outreach workers and the value of schools within an area working together to provide consistent messages.

## School F

### *Context*

School F is a decile 1, urban, contributing school. Like School E it is also part of the Tamaki Achievement Pathways initiative. According to the TKI website the school has a roll of 170 students. The ethnic composition of the school is 36 percent Māori; one percent Pākehā, 37 percent Tongan; 11 percent Samoan; seven percent Niuean; three percent Cook Island; two percent African; one percent Fijian; and two percent other Pacific. (ERO report, 2005.)

Like School E, this school was initially involved in the Ministry of Education funded, home-school partnership in literacy programme. It is part of the Pasifika School Community and Parent Liaison Project (PSCPL), and its students go on to other schools in this community that also have home-school partnership programmes operating. Also like School E, this school has adapted its current home-school partnership initiatives from the Ministry of Education HSP: Literacy model.

We chose this school for inclusion as a case study because we were particularly interested in the way it was attempting to engage parents in their children's learning through the children themselves. This school had started out using the Ministry of Education's HSP: literacy model and then adapted it to better suit the needs of its parents. This school has good data showing improvements in reading achievement over the last couple of years; however it is not possible to directly link these improvements with the home-school partnership initiative.

### *NZCER data collection*

Group interviews were carried out with six teachers, eight students and eight parents. The principal was also interviewed individually. The school provided documentation of their planning and achievement data.

### *Initiatives:*

#### *Involving the students in the parents' sessions:*

According to the principal the school "stumbled" on its unique approach to running parent sessions by accident. In 2006 the new entrant class invited the principal to come and see their dinosaur expo. She was so impressed with the students' work she decided to include the expo in the junior school "home-school-partnership night".

The children presented their clay model dinosaurs and told the parents their scientific names, they demonstrated their volcanoes that fizzed, and read out their charts and notes to a hall full of smiling parents, glowing with pride. The parents just loved it. So we thought "aha, use the kids." So this was the beginning of our successful model. (Principal)

From that point, staff designed home-school-partnership sessions that involved the students themselves. For example, teachers developed sessions that involved the children teaching their parents reading and maths, to illustrate how these subjects are taught at school.

#### *Sharing assessment data with parents:*

The school has acted on the parents' wish to know more about their children's learning and now share asTTLe data with parents to show them where the children are, and how they are progressing in reading and maths. They have redesigned their report forms to include graphs, so that parents with English as a second language can "read" them more easily. (Translations of the instructions on how to read the graphs are now also included following

feedback from the community.) Three-way conferences are also used to report on students' progress, and these have been well attended.

### ***School data linking partnerships to improved student achievement***

AsTTle data shows improvement in reading levels over the last two years and there is anecdotal evidence that student engagement in learning has improved. Parental attendance has increased at the HSP meetings at the school and at the parent interviews. In 2005, they had a 68 percent turn out at parent interviews; in 2006 it increased to 75 percent, and in 2007 it was 81 percent. At the HSP "dinosaur" meeting they had 75 parents attend and that was just the junior parents. Two thirds of their parents have been involved right from the start, but about 20 percent of families are not involved. Word of mouth is bringing more family members in, (for example a group of Tongan young fathers, and also older siblings.)

### ***Overall impression***

All groups interviewed in this school were very positive about the home-school-partnership initiatives. The teachers and the principal said that the key to bringing the parents into the school was the children, but the focus of the home-school-partnership sessions was on learning.

The main difference about this successful home-school partnership model from the Ministry's HSP: Literacy or Numeracy model is the part students play in the partnership. Instead of being a two-way model (between teachers and parents) this is a three-way model, involving the students as a critical partner in the relationship. The students act as the linkage between the parents and the teachers/school, rather than lead parents taking this role. There are no lead parents in this model. The idea of involving the students in the parent sessions as the "teachers" rather than separating the children from the parents, and designing the session so that parents are involved in activities as the "students" appears to have been the critical factor in the success of this initiative.

Other factors that make this initiative successful are:

- *The whole school approach.* In the strategic plan the school has two HSP meetings planned in their overview around week four and week eight of each term, with senior and junior syndicates doing one each a term.
- *Total teacher support.* Teacher workloads are shared via syndicate planning, and although initially it was quite a lot of work, it is much better now according to the teachers. "We get together in our teams and plan the HSP evening—everyone has their role". "They are loving it", according to the principal, "and it is a real morale booster—there is a real buzz at school the next day".
- *Successful and strategic marketing.* The social worker advertises the HSP meetings on the radio, they have translations in newsletters in Samoan and Tongan, and they also advertise in the Friday flyer. The children take home invitations and letters.
- *Involvement of culturally appropriate support people.* The involvement of the Tongan social worker is imperative, as he can explain why the parents should help their children, and what benefit it is to them, in their own language. Support in the wider community is important as well such as the Pacific liaison advisor. This gives people who don't want to talk to teachers, other people to talk to.
- *Students are getting 'learning' messages that are consistent between home and school.* The principal pointed out that children are listening to teachers talking about how important their learning is, at every single HSP meeting. They are getting messages about what good learning is. She added,

It's not about social interaction—it's always got to be about learning, which is bi-directional. Our teachers need to learn as much from the parents as the parents learn from them and this idea came from the parent



mentoring model I was involved in. The HSP model is a deficit view—telling parents as if they didn't know things. We want parents to talk about achievement and progress and assessment. (Principal)

- *Focus on helping parents understand learning.* The success is largely due to the focus of giving parents a better understanding of what their children are learning at school and different ways of helping them. The Tongan social worker explained how schooling is different from in the Islands, because in New Zealand parents and teachers have a shared job, whereas the teachers' job in the Islands is to do everything, including developing appropriate behaviour and teaching students to pass exams. He said, 'here we teach our children how to learn, which is very different.'

Both the principal and the teachers were very explicit that the focus of home-school partnerships needed to be on learning. Parents want to know more about how their children are doing at school, and about what they are learning, so they can help them at home, as in their view many aspects of learning have changed radically since they were at school. They also want to know about how well their children were doing in relation to other children their age (national norm) and what progress they are making. Teachers, children and parents seemed to be developing a "shared language of learning" enabling them to talk about achievement, progress and assessment.

Teachers reported that their Māori and Pasifika parents are really interested in their children's learning, and don't want "stuff dumbed down". Parents are now asking valuable questions in parent interviews, based on what was in the written reports. They know to say "Why hasn't my child's reading got better? What does this mean?" They are more familiar with the learning jargon and have the confidence to ask questions and raise issues where necessary. They also give the teachers good ideas about what they want to know.

### *Context specific features*

The initiatives in this school are a development of the Ministry of Education's model. The school is in an area where both the intermediate and secondary school are also involved in initiatives to increase parental engagement, so there is potential for working with parents to have long term impact. The involvement of the children themselves as active partners in the home-school partnership is especially powerful. As in some of the other case studies, the small size of this school was also given as a factor contributing to the success of the initiative.

The school has responded to its local needs. A large proportion of the school's parents have English as a second language and the school has developed its home-school partnership around the wishes of these parents—to know more about their children's progress at school and what they are learning. The school has used a Tongan social worker and a Pacific liaison person to help in explaining messages between the parents and the school, and to provide a more culturally appropriate link.

The staff have also responded to feedback from the parents gained through a survey, about the kinds of reporting they prefer in the three-way conferences.

We asked the parents questions about the report and whether the information was valuable. Feedback was quite varied. They liked the graphs because they could see where their children were at with reading, maths etc. They were visual graphs, which were especially good for ESOL speakers, but some said the graphs were hard to understand—the instructions on how to read the graphs. So we are going to translate the graphs into Tongan and Samoan. That's our next step. (Principal)

### *Nature of partnerships*

As in the other case study schools, parents interviewed felt their role was to “back teachers up” but that they also had a role as the children’s first teachers. “We teach them basics and back up what the teachers are doing—our role is to be teachers as well as parents.” This meant it was important to parents that they knew how schools in New Zealand operated but also that they knew details about the achievement levels of their children. They saw the point of HSP meetings as “filling in the gaps of what we don’t know”. Teachers interviewed shared this view.

### *Summary*

The key features of this case study that could be generalised to other situations are the way students themselves are involved in engaging their parents in their learning, and the flexibility the school showed in responding to parents’ changing needs. Of particular interest is the way the partnership evolved to focus on the learning of individual students.

## School G

### *Context*

This is an urban based, pan-tribal kura kaupapa Māori. It is a decile 6, composite school (year 1–15) with a roll of 138 students (according to TKI). The kura operates in accordance with the expectations and values base of Te Aho Matua<sup>12</sup> that places emphasis on whānau as the social context for guiding decision making processes. The ERO report (2003) states:

The whānau of [name of school] are integral to good school governance and education. The charter outlines whānau management as the key for the direction of Te Aho Matua. Whānau acknowledge the difference between areas of governance and management and have a comprehensive understanding of their specific roles and responsibilities. Individual whānau members bring a range of expertise and skills to support the established whānau management structure. There is a shared understanding about the importance of their involvement to ensure ongoing improvement.

We chose this school as one of our case study schools partly because we thought its urban pan-tribal character meant practices were likely to be relevant to other kura, and partly because the NZCER researcher involved already had strong links with this kura. Given the short time frame for this project, and the complexities of negotiating research with kura where we do not have already-established relationships prior to the research, this seemed a pragmatic approach.

### *NZCER data collection*

Group interviews were carried out with students, whānau<sup>13</sup>, and teachers. The female principal was also interviewed individually. The student group consisted of three girls and one boy, representing Years 6, 7, 9, and 10 (the two senior students had both previously been to mainstream schools). All four members of the whānau group were female and most were still learning te reo Māori (this group included one grandmother). The teachers’ group was also all female and taught from the junior through to middle school levels, and all teachers were teaching their own children within their classrooms.

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<sup>12</sup> Te Aho Matua is the philosophical foundation of kura kaupapa Māori.

<sup>13</sup> Within this case study, the concept of ‘whānau’ could include parents, caregivers and grandparents, as well as whānau that are linked in a range of ways such as the kura community.

### **Initiatives:**

*Whānau structure of governance and operation:* Whānau are actively engaged in the organisation and development of annual and strategic kura plans. School management decisions are discussed and reported at whānau hui held twice a term. Whānau are represented on six subcommittees (personnel, property, finance, fundraising, sport and the community), that are led by nominated trustees.

*Taumahi-ā-whānau (whānau homework):* This initiative developed within the context of bringing whānau and the kura together—whakawhānaungatanga<sup>14</sup>. The concept for taumahi-ā-whānau was formed after various noho marae, kapa haka and Matariki celebrations were held, promoting learning conversations around community networks and knowledge. Five years later, whānau continue to write, create and/or develop something each term that represents their knowledge and understanding around a particular kaupapa (e.g. Matariki, Water Safety). Whānau then share their work with the entire kura. Presentations are given in a supportive learning context and can take a variety of forms that include stories, waiata, karakia, haka, artworks, reports, performances and games.

### **School data linking partnerships to improved achievement**

It is difficult to directly isolate and link these initiatives to student achievement data: however they are most likely to add to student learning in the following ways. Both initiatives actively promote whakawhānaungatanga or positive whānau collaboration within the kura, resulting in increased language, knowledge, commitment and cultural identity. Learning is enhanced because whānau and the kura are able to share and explore ways of working together in culturally meaningful ways such as intergenerational transmission (i.e. kaumātua working alongside mokopuna providing role models for language development) and reinforcing tuakana/ teina roles (i.e. involving older or younger siblings). All students interviewed appeared to be very positive about school.

### **Overall impression**

Taumahi-ā-whānau is perceived by students, whānau, teachers, and the principal to be an effective means of reinforcing the important role of whānau within education. Through active participation and engagement, whānau become more aware of the content of their children's learning at kura and are encouraged to spend time with their tamariki in educationally helpful ways at home. In this way, whānau homework facilitates the development of culturally specific forms of knowledge and strengthens learning opportunities and development of relationships between the home and kura. All groups also spoke positively about the whānau structure of governance and operation. This case study illustrates all of the key elements of successful home-school partnerships, identified in the Request for Proposals for this project. The partnership between the kura and whānau is so integral to the operation of this kura it is difficult to pinpoint a specific focus for the partnership. Whānau are more involved in all aspects of the kura than would be expected in English medium schools.

### **Context specific features**

Many features of School G are unique to its specific context, however there is potential for other schools to adapt some of these practices as they consider the roles, responsibilities and ways of engaging whānau more fully in their children's learning.

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<sup>14</sup> Whakawhānaungatanga is sometimes seen as a process of getting to know each other or to describe the 'glue' that connects people to each other.

Interviews with whānau indicated that they had specifically chosen to pursue and promote kura kaupapa Māori as an educational option for their children. The infrastructure for whānau and the kura working together had already been forged as part of the existing school policies, practices and processes. Participation and commitment from whānau and the kura to the everyday life of the kura were agreed upon from the outset. All groups interviewed felt that the small size of the kura was a factor in contributing to the strong sense of a kura community: all thought that students were known as individuals and that this helped in providing whānau with opportunities to interact with and influence each other in building relationships with the kura and between whānau themselves.

### *Nature of partnerships*

All groups interviewed felt that the home and the school valued similar things and that both the kura and individual whānau were responsible for the overall wellbeing of students. All agreed that as a collective, whānau held the authority for making kura wide decisions and that the regular whānau hui (as well as newsletters and email) were an effective means for communicating these processes.

The principal felt that home–school partnerships lead to better whānau understanding of the importance of their role in their children’s education and that this in turn could lead to improved achievement. Whānau also saw the kura environment as providing them with a surrogate ‘city whānau or papakāinga’<sup>15</sup>. Whānau were also conscious of not adding to the workload of kaiako and saw it as their own role to provide opportunities for their children that they might not otherwise have in kura.

### *Summary*

In this case study, home–school partnerships are integral to the way the school operates. The school could not operate without the partnership. The very nature of the partnership described here is different from that in the “mainstream” case study schools and as such may help mainstream educators clarify their own thinking about the purpose and nature of partnerships.

## School H

### *Context:*

This case study is different from the others in this project in that it focuses on one strategy implemented by a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour in a secondary school, rather than a whole school approach.<sup>16</sup>

We thought it was worthwhile to include this “mini” case study because the strategy is very simple and it seems likely that it would be easy to implement on a much bigger scale. It is a practical example of how the home experiences of the student can be used to facilitate learning and of how families might be encouraged to take a more active role in their children’s learning.

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<sup>15</sup> In a broad sense, the term papakāinga speaks to the social systems (such as hapū, iwi or a group of people and how they may be governed) that nurture the relationship of Māori with their culture, traditions ancestral lands and other taonga.

<sup>16</sup> NB. In this large decile 7 secondary school, the NZCER researcher also interviewed the principal and two staff involved with a Māori mentoring programme. Data from these interviews, are not reported here, but have been incorporated into the discussion section of the report.

### *NZCER data collection*

The RTLB was interviewed individually about this intervention. She was also present in the room, though engaged in other work, while the student and her mother were interviewed (together).

#### *Initiative:*

The strategy described here was one component of an “intervention” to support a Year 10 student, who was a persistent truant, to be in class and engaged with learning. The aim of the strategy was to increase the student’s comprehension skills within the home context.<sup>17</sup> The programme consisted of the student watching the TV programme “Shortland Street” four times a week with her mother and telling her mother what the main ideas in the episode were, who the characters involved were, and making a prediction of what would happen next. The student had a notebook with the questions, and the mother simply ticked them off. The programme was simple to operate and did not place an undue burden on anyone involved. The rationale behind this approach was that “Shortland Street” was a “text” that was already part of the family’s life and this was a way of engaging the whānau to promote the learning of the student.

### *RTLB data linking partnership to improved student achievement*

After a term on this programme, the student did not show the expected gains in reading comprehension: however, in that term she was truant from class on 37 occasions compared with 129 occasions in the previous term, which perhaps suggests some improvement in engagement with school. It is of course not possible to attribute this improvement in attendance at school directly to any particular aspect of the intervention.

### *Overall impressions*

There appeared to be excellent two-way communication between the home and school in this example. The RTLB clearly had established a trusting, respectful relationship with both the student and her mother. The perceptions of all three interviewees were that this strategy was very successful (even though at the time of the interviews no achievement data were available). The mother said she found this intervention helpful because it had given her some practical strategies for how to engage her daughter in conversation and encourage her to think about what she was watching on TV. In this way the strategy capitalised on the home experiences of the student to facilitate learning.

### *Context specific features*

The RTLB service actively promotes the inclusion of families in education, and in this particular case study the RTLB herself was clearly personally committed to working closely with whānau.<sup>18</sup>

### *Nature of partnerships*

This partnership seems to be one of equals in that, although the RTLB set up the intervention and the initial questions, the mother felt confident and involved enough to develop the strategy further. There was a clearly

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<sup>17</sup> The student had previously identified that one of the reasons that she was truanting was that she found the school work difficult. Subsequent reading tests showed that although she could decode well her reading comprehension was poor.

<sup>18</sup> This mini case study is included because it illustrates a simple way to help parents support their children’s learning at home, rather than as an example of good RTLB practice.

defined purpose for the partnership. During this interview the mother said she believed the role of parents in the education of their children was to provide support, identify problems their children were having and advocate for their children. She spoke of the importance of parents having honest information about their children's progress and achievement so that they could do this. In her experience, it was not always easy to get the information needed from teachers and she felt that some teachers were threatened when parents questioned them about their children's lack of progress and saw this as a criticism of their ability to teach.

### *Summary*

This mini case study illustrates a very simple strategy for providing family with techniques to encourage interaction with their children in a way that is likely to develop skills that are valued in school, without adding undue pressure.

## **What does all this mean?**

According to the Request for Proposals for this project, the purpose of the empirical research component of this project was to identify successful home-school partnerships within New Zealand, focusing on the school's roles and responsibilities and to investigate and analyse the features of these partnerships in relation to the contexts in which they operate. The lack of robust data linking partnerships to improved achievement meant that we were unable to explicitly identify the features of successful school partnerships; however we were able to identify several contextual features that influenced the sorts of partnerships that have developed. The New Zealand case studies also illustrated many of the key features of successful partnerships described in the international research literature. Perhaps more importantly, though, these case studies allowed us to identify various questions that we believe need further thought and research. These are discussed in the next section of this report.

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## 5. Discussion

### Why the interest in home–school partnerships?

This project (and much of the literature on home–school partnerships) is based on the following assumptions:

- parental involvement in education is a good thing (and the more the better); and,
- home–school partnerships can help lift student achievement.

However, we found very few examples of home–school partnerships, in either the literature review or in the empirical research component of this project, that had data showing improvements in student achievement.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the term “home–school partnership” is being used to describe such a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing parents’ involvement in the education of their children that the purpose of the partnership is often not clear.

There seem to be two broad rationales put forward in discussions about these kinds of partnerships. In the first, partnerships are seen as an important way of enhancing democratic participation and in bringing schools, and the communities they serve, closer together. In the second, and this is the one we focus on here, partnership is seen as a way of lifting achievement. This idea stems from the substantial research literature showing that (at least some forms of) “naturally occurring” or “spontaneous” parental involvement in education is beneficial to children’s educational achievement (Pomerantz and Moorman, 2007). The assumption is that interventions aimed at increasing parental involvement will also have positive effects on achievement. This is an assumption that needs some unpacking. If this is the case, what is the nature of this relationship? However, if assuming for the moment that there is a relationship between parental involvement and achievement the following questions arise: What sorts of involvement make a difference, how, and to whom? Could it be that parents who are naturally involved with their children’s education are involved in a qualitatively different manner from those parents who are “induced” to be involved through interventions such as home–school partnerships? Can we assume that home–school partnership initiatives will necessarily have the same beneficial effects as naturally occurring parental involvement?

To complicate matters further, the terms “parental participation”, “involvement”, and “engagement” are being used interchangeably with “home-school partnerships” in the literature. The range of the nature and purpose of home–school partnership initiatives in the empirical part of this project further illustrates the general lack of clarity associated with the term.

In the proposal for this research project, we said we would concentrate on home–school partnerships that fitted into the first four of Epstein’s six categories of “shared responsibility” (parenting, communicating, volunteering and learning at home) as these seemed most closely linked to raising student achievement. However, as it turned out, our case studies did not fit neatly into this model. Many of the case study schools had strategies in place that

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<sup>19</sup> This of course does not mean that home–school partnerships do not make a difference to student achievement, just that there is as yet little hard data to show that they do.

covered all these four categories, and even within just the one category of “communicating”, communication could be one-way or two-way; and it could be about individual students, pedagogical issues, or school organisation. The purpose of communication could be any one (or a combination) of the following:

1. Building relationships;
2. Giving information about the individual or the school. (The school information could be focused on learning or organisational matters);
3. School home alignment. (This could be aimed at producing “school-like homes” or “home-like schools”);<sup>20</sup> or
4. Working together to create something different.

### Thinking carefully about home–school partnerships

Given this level of complexity, it seems timely to pause and think carefully about the nature and purpose of home–school partnerships. Timperley and Robinson (2002) suggest that one of the factors that contribute to the lack of coherence in this field is that neither the literature on partnerships for participatory democracy, nor that on partnerships for lifting achievement, deals adequately with the multi-dimensional nature of partnership. They argue that partnerships have both a relationship and a task dimension. The success of partnerships depends on how well the partners integrate the relationship and task dimensions to work together and learn from each other. In addition, the way power is distributed—and how (if at all) this is acknowledged—is an important influence on effective partnerships.

There are examples in the research literature, and from our own case studies, that suggest that the establishment of programmes is in itself unlikely to result in more equal, strengths-based partnerships if it is not accompanied by support for teachers, in particular, to think clearly about the purposes of the partnerships. For instance, if those running parent evenings think their aim is to encourage families to incorporate school-like practices into their homes, the focus of the sessions will be quite different from sessions that are aimed at families and schools bringing their respective skills and expertise together to create learning opportunities for students that neither partner could provide on their own. If the intention is to develop strengths-based partnerships both parties need, at the very least, to share an understanding of the intent of the interaction, the task involved and their respective roles. This of course requires effective two-way communication. Equal partnerships do not necessarily mean that both partners need to do the same things, but rather that they have complementary roles to play in the education of children. It is important that partnerships allow flexibility and are responsive to differing (and changing) needs so that families can be involved in ways that are meaningful for them.

### The relationship dimension of partnerships

Regardless of the ultimate purpose of the partnership, the establishment of relationships is an essential first step. In the case studies, strategies were sometimes in place specifically to enhance relationships. At School B, for example, the principal spoke about six different strategies all aimed at strengthening home–school partnerships. With the exception of the three-way learning conferences, all these strategies seem to focus on relationship

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<sup>20</sup> By “school-like homes” we mean that parents are encouraged to include school type activities (for example maths games, reading together etc.) into their home life and by “home-like schools” we mean teachers are encouraged to use knowledge of children’s home life to create more culturally responsive teaching and learning environments at school.



building and communication even though the purpose of home–school partnerships, as described in the school newsletter, is to raise student achievement. The principal saw relationship building as an essential step in developing a school learning culture.

In schools that had specific programmes in place, such as parent evenings based on the Ministry of Education HSP model, the initial aim of these programmes was often just to get parents into the school and to build relationships, both between teachers and parents, and between parents and other parents. These initiatives are perhaps particularly important in schools that do not serve already closely connected communities with values and practices similar to those of the school. The focus of the strategy changed in some cases, over time from being initially relationship-based to becoming more learning-based. If the purpose of the partnership is lifting achievement, explicit strategies are needed to produce the shift in emphasis from the relationship dimension to the task dimension of the partnership.

### The task dimension of partnerships

Even where the partnership had progressed to being explicitly focused on student learning there were still a range of different purposes. In many of the case studies the task dimension of the partnership was home–school alignment. At a very basic level this often simply involved schools communicating to parents, usually via newsletters, about organisational issues to do with school. Sometimes these newsletters also contained information for parents as to how to support their children’s learning.

Similarly the home–school partnership parent evening sessions at some schools give information to families about school programmes and ways that these could be supported in the home in an attempt to align home–school practices. Parents and students interviewed were often appreciative of these initiatives as illustrated by the following quotes from one school:

It didn’t happen before because we just did our homework by ourselves, before HSP started, and sometimes got them wrong, and we were slacking with the homework before HSP. Now parents make sure we do our homework. (Student)

My grandchild loves me coming to school. The learning curve for us as parents is huge—teaching us how to help our kids with homework. (Grandparent)

In both of these examples, the school holds much of the power and the emphasis is on getting parents to collaborate with school activities.

The Learning Pathways programme at School D and the whānau homework project at School G illustrate partnerships where the task dimension is more than simply encouraging parents to support school practices. The purpose of these initiatives is for the school and the community to work *together* to create something different, rather than the school “rolling out” its practices into the home. In both these case studies, the people in the community are seen as the resources and critical to the students’ learning. They contribute something to the learning that the school cannot do alone.

## The integration of relationship and task dimensions in partnerships

Although it may be useful to think about partnerships in terms of either relationships or tasks, these two dimensions clearly interact with each other. At School F for instance the way power was shared between the school and parents meant that the original task of the partnership could be re-negotiated by parents to meet changing needs. This school originally ran the MOE HSP: Literacy programme but then adapted it in response to feedback from parents. The school found that the parents wanted to know more than what activities to do to help their children at home. They wanted to know about progress, achievement and assessment and so the school modified its approach to better suit the parents' needs and to ensure teachers could also learn from parents. The initiatives at this school were clearly driven by needs expressed by the community, rather than by needs perceived by the school. The task dimension of the partnership changed from encouraging parents to participate in school-like activities to developing a shared "language of learning" across the school community as parents became more confident in the school setting and willing to take a more active role in determining how they would participate in their children's learning.

At another school the interplay between the relationship and task dimensions of a partnership was illustrated by the comments of a Māori teacher. In her view, even if there was a clearly understood shared task Māori parents would not become engaged in the education of their children unless they felt they were genuinely valued by the school and that there was a commitment to "things Māori".

## Nature of partnerships

In "mainstream" schools, traditionally the relationship between teachers and parents is that of professional and client. Children go to school to learn specific cognitive/ academic skills from the experts (teachers). There is generally a clear differentiation between what teachers do and parents do. At the mainstream case study schools, parents saw their role as being to support the school in the education of their children. They said things like "the teachers are the educators and our role is to reinforce what they say", "the school's role is to teach the academics", "our role is to support the teachers" and "ensure our children are ready to learn". To be able to fulfil their role as they saw it parents felt they needed to have good communication with the school, accurate information about their children's progress and information about school programmes in general. Our case studies support the work of Katyal and Evans (2007). Like them we found that, whilst parents and teachers saw that their roles overlapped in terms of their responsibility for socialisation of children, teachers also had specific roles as the "experts" when it came to teaching and learning. This does not negate the need for mutually respectful relationships, it just emphasises that "equal" does not necessarily mean "the same". Successful partnerships do not mean the partners have the same roles and have to do everything together—levels of interaction between partners will vary from one context to another.

In our special school and the kura kaupapa Māori case studies the nature of the partnerships were very different from those in the "mainstream" schools. The boundaries between home and school were blurred and both the basic power relationships and the tasks in the partnerships were different. Parents interviewed at the special school said they felt the relationship between home and school was different when a child had "special needs". In particular they felt they had to be more directly involved in the education of their child with "special needs", and advocate for them. For these children education had a strong focus on developing "life skills" rather than cognitive/ academic skills. This meant that it was essential that there was clear communication between home and school (and other agencies) in order to ensure consistency in expectations and approaches, as the same skills were

often being developed by different people in different settings. This in turn meant that the teacher was just one member of a larger team working together to meet the child's individual needs. Learning programmes were driven by the needs of the individual and determined jointly by school, family and other professionals.

Similarly at the kura kaupapa Māori the partnership between home and school was integral to the way the kura operated. The kura's policies, practices and processes arose from a commitment to education being a joint endeavour between whānau and kura. The parents interviewed thought the responsibility for the overall well being of students was shared between individual whānau and the kura. They felt that as a collective, whānau held the authority for making kura-wide decisions. The kura serves the whānau and when parents decide to enrol their children in kura, they also make a commitment to working in partnership with the kura. Here home-school partnerships are not a desirable extra, they are absolutely fundamental to how the school operates.

Neither the special school nor the kura kaupapa Māori could operate without home-school partnerships. For different reasons, both schools have developed different ways of working with parents that could provide "food for thought" for mainstream education. The vision of the new New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, p7) is "Young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners." If this vision is to be realised mainstream schools will need to think carefully about how they connect with families to ensure that students' learning outside school is recognised and validated as well as what happens inside schools. Kura kaupapa Māori and special schools may provide useful examples to support this thinking.

### **Partnerships are context-specific**

The examples discussed above of the special school and the kura kaupapa Māori clearly illustrate how context affects the nature of a partnership. There were many other examples of this in our case studies. Two case study schools served areas where there was clearly a strong sense of community. One of these schools was rural, the other, although urban, served a clearly defined geographical area. At both these schools, parents and school staff spoke of the important role parents played in involving other parents in the school. Many parents knew each other outside school and this meant parents communicated with each other about school events. In the case of the rural school, staff also lived within the community and the parents felt this made it easier to build relationships with them. The strong sense of cohesion in the communities served by these schools perhaps implies that, in these areas, the schools themselves do not need to be as proactive in the promotion of home-school links as schools serving more diverse and loosely bound communities.

The low decile schools in this study served communities that were ethnically diverse, with the language spoken in many homes and the home cultural practices being different from those of the teachers. In these schools, the success of home-school partnership initiatives seemed largely dependant on the effective participation of "outreach workers" who were respected within the communities, and on teachers' commitment. In one area where Early Childhood centres, primary, intermediate and secondary schools were all working together to strengthen links between themselves and between the communities they served, promising results seemed to be indicated. In this area the attendance at Early Childhood centres of Pasifika children had reportedly increased dramatically and parents reported receiving similar messages about education regardless of the age and level of education of their child.

The size of a school was also reported to affect the development of successful home-school partnerships. Principals, staff and parents of small schools all identified the small size as a positive contributing factor in developing positive home-school partnerships. At the secondary school where we interviewed the RTLB, the principal said that she was considering organising the school into five vertical groups for next year, each of about three hundred students, because she felt that the large size of the school inhibited the engagement of both students and their parents.

The age of students was also seen by many parents as a barrier to their involvement in their education. Parents felt their children did not want them to be as involved when they were at secondary school, but also the parents felt less comfortable about going into secondary schools. This was particularly noticeable in the Area School where even though it was one school, parents felt they were much more involved with the education of their younger children. These parents thought specific interventions to encourage parental engagement were especially important therefore for secondary schools.

## **Common features across case studies**

Despite the importance of context in determining what sort of partnerships developed in a school, there still seemed to be some commonalities across the case studies. We saw many examples of new technologies being used creatively to strengthen links between school and home. The Digital Imaging in Special Education project and the Phone Home initiatives were both examples of this. Other schools were posting newsletters on line, setting up blogging areas on school websites and encouraging use of email between school and home. Although such technology can make it easier for some parents to be involved in their children's education, there is also the potential for this to increase the demands on teachers.

In nearly all of the case study schools, the principal was identified by staff, parents and sometimes students as a key player in the development of successful home-school partnerships. Interestingly most of the principals had only been at the case study schools for a relatively short time. They were all concerned with strengthening home-school partnerships as a way of raising achievement. (Given though that the principals nominated their schools as examples of successful home-school partnerships, this is not surprising.)

Teachers' attitudes and a shared understanding of the purposes of partnerships and partners' roles also seem to be critical to the success of home-school partnerships.

## **Building successful partnerships takes time and commitment**

At one case study school, the principal said that over the last few years she had specifically looked for staff who were committed to the principle of home-school partnerships when recruiting new staff. At this school, the staff interviewed saw working with parents as an integral part of their job rather than an "add on", and could clearly articulate the benefits of having parents involved in the school—both in terms of the school programmes and their own teaching practice.

The principal of another school where home-school partnerships were also clearly an integral part of the normal programme spoke about the need for commitment of both the school and the parents. This was backed up by another principal who reiterated the importance of staff having time to really think carefully about the

implications of home-school partnerships and what was involved. She explained the process she was working through with her staff:

The HSP interventions started in 2005 with a school systems review on our responsiveness to diversity. Then we integrated it in 2006 with our strategic plan and planning. Staff culture needed changing—we had staff meetings about relationships with families- and getting staff to be more aware of our families and to the diverse needs of our students. We needed commitment to all working together with the parents to raise student achievement... Teachers have required PD and a change in mindset. In any interventions you have got to be able to discuss the gnarly bits and work through them. Open discussions rather than top-down. I know when there is the change process, there are going to be implementation dips...Part of this is about leadership and how these things are managed and having systems in place to give it traction, such as Teacher Only Days, looking at all the data and our strategic plan and how well we've done. We have looked at the research and discussed this. I'm not mandating the interventions. You need to be listening to staff, but bringing staff along with you. (Principal)

## Adapting current school practices

If teachers are supported to think carefully about the purpose of home-school partnerships, so that they can develop a commitment to genuine two-way communication with parents and shared responsibility for education of children, we think there are several current practices that, with slight modifications, could go some way towards achieving this. Parent teacher conferences and homework currently appear to be the natural intersection between school and home. Although the research literature<sup>21</sup> suggests that both these school practices currently often alienate parents the case studies in both the review of evidence and empirical research components of this project suggest this does not need to be the case.

Several of our case studies suggested that by modifying parent teacher conferences (usually by including the student as an active participant), parents can be encouraged to engage more fully with the learning of their children, and these also provide teachers with useful information about the child from the perspective of the family. Overseas studies show “interactive homework”<sup>22</sup> as an effective way of raising student achievement. In the New Zealand case studies, the kura kaupapa Māori provides an example of families and the school working jointly together on homework, to provide learning experiences that are relevant to the life of the learner.

There are several advantages of these strategies as ways to enhance parental engagement. Firstly they are focused on individual children, and the case studies clearly showed that parents were interested and concerned in their own children's learning. Because they focus on individual students these strategies have the potential to support the Ministry of Education's current focus on personalising learning. They also involve things that teachers already do, so, rather than adding to the workload, they only require teachers to think and work in slightly different ways. These strategies allow teachers to draw on the expert knowledge of parents about their children, and also give parents the specific information about their children's learning that, according to our interviews, they so clearly wanted.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Epstein (2001), Maclure & Walker (2000), Walker (1998)

<sup>22</sup> Interactive homework is homework that intentionally involves the family in the child's learning by including activities that require interaction with family members.

The new curriculum, with its focus on Key Competencies, makes it even more important that there is effective two-way communication between school and home. Key Competencies are demonstrated when a student adapts what they know and uses this in a new context. Families need to know therefore what the Key Competencies involve, and teachers need information from families if they are to gain a more complete picture of what a student can do. Ideally successful home-school partnerships involve families and teachers working together, drawing on their respective areas of expertise to optimise learning for the student, not just making homes more like school. In the words of one of the principals interviewed:

The more we come to believe that relationships are important for learning, the more we need the parents' expertise about their child. The old ways are not working—the kids are voting with their feet. We're a tiny part of the girls' lives—we over emphasise our own importance. (secondary principal)

These suggestions for adapting current school practices to enhance parental engagement in their children's education do not mean that initiatives aimed at whole groups, such as parent evenings are not effective—we simply don't know enough about *how* and what sorts of parental engagement really make a difference to student achievement. These suggestions about adapting current practices though at least provide an opportunity for “parent voice” to be heard without producing unrealistic work loads for teachers.

## Looking forward

Given the current emphasis being placed on home–school partnerships (and the lack of robust data supporting such initiatives) it is important that educators take time to think carefully about the nature and purpose of interactions between school and families if home–school partnerships really are to be effective in reducing disparity and developing successful 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. What sorts of interactions between home and school actually make a difference to children's learning? What is *really* meant by the term “partnership”? What, in essence, is the *purpose* of these partnerships? Do both partners have a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership? In what ways are the roles of the partners similar, and in what ways are they different? Are such partnerships inevitably the best option in all contexts? It is perhaps also worth taking time to think about the assumptions that underpin partnership initiatives aimed at students from “minority” groups and to consider ways of ensuring the views of those belonging to these target groups are heard. Do current practices advantage some groups more than others? Do we know enough about what sort of partnerships are beneficial; specifically how they are beneficial, and for whom?

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## Appendix A:

Twenty three schools expressed interest in being part of this project. We selected eight (this number includes a “mini case study”) to give us a range of initiatives and school settings. This means that several interesting initiatives were not followed up. The salient features of some of these initiatives are briefly described here to give a fuller picture of the range of home–school partnership initiatives that are currently operating in various schools around New Zealand.

In almost half of the schools not selected as case studies in this project, the home–school partnership initiatives were adaptations of the Ministry of Education’s Home–School Partnership model. Typically these schools had begun with the Home–School Partnership: Literacy programme and then extended this to include other curriculum areas such as health or the Key Competencies. At one of these schools the principal described the purpose of the home–school partnership as:

We are trying to build a partnership with parents so that we are working together to support student learning and achievement. We are also supporting parents to help their children resist societal and community pressures on children e.g. gang culture which is prevalent in our community. (Principal)

This decile two school has been running a home–school partnership model that is facilitated by the school and involves training lead parents since it was involved in the Ministry initiative in 2004. The principal reports increased parental involvement in all aspects of school life e.g. cultural and sporting events and school trips as well as willingness on the behalf of parents to be involved in discussions about student learning. It was one of the few schools we found that had home–school partnership programmes that had been running for more than two years.

At one intermediate school, home–school partnerships had reportedly increased the level of parental involvement to the level where parents were not only helping out with supervision on school trips but were actively involved in organising the trips and cultural exchanges. At this school parents were key players in the decision to make a school trip to Tonga and one to Samoa.

At another school a teacher is paid a Management Unit to take responsibility for working with the “hardest to reach” families. She makes home visits, takes food parcels and involves other agencies where necessary to support families.

At yet another school, the principal had recently moved from a decile one school that had been involved in the Ministry of Education’s home–school partnership model and was adapting what she had experienced there to provide for the needs of a very large number of Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants at her new decile ten school. This project was in its very early stages but the principal was already recognising that different immigrant groups had different needs and expectations of the education system.

Another interesting adaptation of the Ministry of Education model was where a school was working jointly with the District Health Board and two community organisations to run parents’ sessions where the focus was on health

and nutrition. This initiative was more a partnership between home, school and community rather than just home and school. There were also other examples of partnerships, involving community organisations.

In 2003 one school<sup>23</sup> in partnership with COMET (City of Manukau Education Trust), AUT (Auckland University of Technology) and the local kindergarten undertook a pilot programme, the Manakau Family Literacy Programme, aimed at supporting adults and their children learning together. It was developed because Manukau City recognised that if the city is to prosper it needs a well educated skilled workforce to encourage new businesses to set up in the area. Along with high educational needs, the city has an increasing crime problem, and high health and welfare needs. The outcomes from this project have reportedly far exceeded initial expectations. Several parents who have graduated from MFLP have gone on to further tertiary education.

The school had two graduates on the previous BOT, and four of the current BOT elected from eight nominations! We have improved the connection of parents with the school, gained their confidence, and seen parents either in employment for the first time, or studying to be early childhood or primary teachers, chefs, and nurses. What better way to get teachers who know your community, and parents who are confident to stand for BOT elections? Staff are committed to MFLP because they see the benefits in their classrooms as parents learn and participate daily in their child's learning environment....

We believe every decile one school should be supported by the MOE to operate an MFL Programme as the results speak for themselves.... What other programmes are there which are so life changing that can empower families not just individuals, and solve so many of the nation's social and economic problems in such a short timeframe? (Principal)

A community college provided a parents' class for refugee parents that ran alongside a homework centre. The homework centre served both secondary and primary refugee students in the city and whilst the students were attending the homework centre, a separate class was run for the parents. The Associate Principal, the college ESOL teacher, and bilingual refugee liaison officers were involved in planning the programme and the selection of lead parents. They were supported by regional ESOL advisers. Last year sixty one parents completed the course. This programme was due to run again this year after Ramadan but the timing did not fit in with the fieldwork scheduled for the project so it was not included as a case study.

Another primary school had employed a private "trainer" to work with ten parents on how to "coach" their children at home in literacy and numeracy. Parents attend three workshops, are provided with a manual and attend a weekly tutoring session where the trainer works with their child. There were also other schools using a variety of literacy programmes. One school had been running the "Pause, Prompt, Praise" programme<sup>24</sup> for seven years and the principal reported that in that time no child had come off the programme reading below their chronological age. At another school there was a junior school teacher who was really passionate about improving home-school partnerships and in particular transition from Early Childhood centres to school. She was running an early literacy programme at school each Friday afternoon for four year olds and their parents. She felt this gave the children a "head start" but also allowed both them and their parents to become familiar with the school environment before actually starting school.

Another school had developed a school induction programme for new entrants, with the aim of facilitating a smooth transition to school. It informs parents of what happens at school so they can be more involved in supporting their children. This programme is supported by a DVD that the school had produced.

<sup>23</sup> Although, a really interesting initiative this school was not selected as a case study as it had been researched elsewhere.

<sup>24</sup> This programme involves training parents to support their children's reading at home.

At yet another primary school where there was a Māori immersion unit, the whānau of children in this unit appeared to be centrally involved in decision making about their children's education. Whānau members were involved in joint planning with teachers and in leading activities various activities. The purpose of the partnership in this unit was to involve families in every part of their children's learning.

The initiatives outlined above further illustrate the wide range of approaches, and high levels of creativity and commitment by providers that is identified in the research literature on interventions designed to increase parental engagement.