

# Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement With Parents, Families, and Communities in New Zealand

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## Abstract

The Education Review Office (ERO) conducted an external evaluation in over two hundred New Zealand schools to find out more about the engagement between schools and the parents and *whānau* (families and extended families) of their students. This paper provides some historical background and key findings from the relevant literature before expanding on the six key factors which the evaluation found were critical to enhancing and strengthening this engagement: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication. The paper concludes with recommendations for ways in which all parties can strengthen this vital relationship.

Key words: New Zealand, partnerships, learning, schools, engagement, parents, families, community, family involvement, students, leadership, relationships, school culture, climate, networks, communication, primary, secondary

## Introduction

The Education Review Office is the agency, independent of the Ministry of Education, charged with evaluating the quality of education in New Zealand schools and early childhood centers. As well as reviewing all schools and centers on a three-year cycle, it gathers data on areas of national interest—as broad as career guidance, boys' education, and assessment practices. Many of the areas

of national interest lead to published reports, which are often supported by case studies of best practice in that topic area.

Research evidence from a wide range of studies and syntheses (e.g., Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; Epstein et al., 2002; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2006) shows that effective partnerships between parents, families, and schools can result in better outcomes for students. The better the engagement between parents, families, and schools, the greater the positive impact on student learning. When discussing the concept of family in New Zealand, the Māori word *whānau* is often used as it gives a broader perspective of the nature and role of the family. Whānau is generally translated as “wider” or “extended” family and acknowledges that family members beyond a child’s parents often have a role as a child’s caregiver. It also acknowledges that there are a range of family configurations in modern day society. It is used in this article to cover both of those meanings. The use of the word or concept in this way is not limited to Māori families but is in general usage across many cultural groups.

As identified in the Education Review Office’s (ERO) Statement of Intent and the Ministry of Education’s schooling and early childhood strategies, parents, whānau, and communities need to take an active part in the life of schools and early childhood services and to be well informed about what constitutes high quality education and good practice. ERO evaluations have shown that not all schools have positive relationships with *all* their parents, whānau, or communities. Some parents do not feel well informed about their child’s learning or about how they could work more closely with the school to benefit their child. Some schools, especially secondary schools, report that low levels of parental response hamper their efforts to consult with parents, whānau, and communities or involve them more in school life.

In 2007, ERO undertook an evaluation to investigate three areas:

- The extent to which school practices contributed to meaningful and respectful partnerships with parents, whānau, and communities;
- The benefits to, and the challenges facing, these partnerships; and
- How partnerships could be strengthened.

In 2008, ERO published three reports based on this evaluation—*Partners in Learning: Schools’ Engagement with Parents, Whānau, and Communities* (ERO, 2008a); *Partners in Learning: Good Practice* (ERO, 2008b); and *Partners in Learning: Parent Voices* (ERO, 2008c).

This article draws on those reports. The first part outlines the historical background to the current situation, themes from relevant research, and the methodology used in the ERO evaluations. The second part focuses on the

findings of the evaluations, including examples of how some schools were overcoming challenges and successfully engaging their parents, whānau, and communities in ways that supported the functioning of the school and the learning of its students.

## **The History and Current Status of Parental Engagement in Schooling in New Zealand**

While schools and families have always been informal collaborators in the education of young people, as both groups have had the interests of these learners at heart, the history of parental engagement in schooling in New Zealand has also included a range of more formal collaborations. This section discusses in more depth three ways that parents, whānau, and schools in New Zealand have interacted for the benefit of students' overall educational experiences. The first is for decision-making purposes, the second is through participation in and collaboration towards common goals, and the third for sharing information. While these categories tend to overlap in some instances, the activities they contain are distinct and varied in nature, depending on whether they are formally or informally organized, voluntary or paid, require vetting or training, and arise spontaneously or are mandated by government.

### **The Role of Parents and Whānau in School Administration and Decision-Making**

The history of the administration of schooling in New Zealand has shown tensions between central, regional, and local control over decision-making in schools. There has always been a willingness to engage parents and communities at each level but with varying degrees of success. The 1877 Education Act established the first national system of “free, compulsory, and secular” primary education. Structurally, twelve regional education boards reported to the Department of Education. School-based decision-making was undertaken by school committees, elected by ballot from local householders. In reality, the power became entrenched in the hands of the education boards and, by the early 1900s, school committees were reduced to making decisions about the maintenance of school property. With the establishment of wider access to secondary schooling, a different system of school-based decision-making evolved at this level as individual secondary schools or school districts set up boards of governors. A move to dissolve education boards in the 1930s was overturned, and better relationships between education boards and the Department of Education strengthened the position of boards through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Economic downturn and social agitation in the 1970s was to lead to

the biggest upheaval in the New Zealand education system since its inception. Riding on a wave of international economic reform, the Labour Government of the 1980s set about restructuring the economy and some of its more expensive operations, including the education system. The regional education boards were abolished, the Department of Education was reduced in size to a smaller, more policy-focused Ministry of Education, and schools were given more decision-making autonomy through the election of individual boards of trustees. Reducing expenditure was not the only motive for change. The desire to extend parental choice, to increase home-school partnerships, and to improve educational outcomes for Māori and for students from low-income families were also cited as reasons.

A Board of Trustees including the principal, a teacher representative, elected parents or community members, and a student (in the case of secondary schools), would be responsible for the governance of the school, that is, making decisions about operational matters, while the principal and his/her team of staff would make management, educational, and professional decisions. It took some time for the roles to be clearly defined and ways of collaborating to become embedded. The *National Education Guidelines* (NEGs) and the *National Administration Guidelines* (NAGs), issued in 1993, helped clarify the goals and purposes of each partner. The importance of clear and accurate communication and consultation with parents, whānau, and communities became a mandated expectation of schools.

### **Participation and Collaboration by Parents, Whānau, and Communities in School Life**

Recognition of the need for schools, parents, whānau, and their communities to work together on common goals has been a strong feature of the New Zealand schooling system. The first formal “home and school” association was formed in 1906. Today a range of similar groups continues to exist under the umbrella of the New Zealand Parent Teacher Association (NZPTA). Such organizations play a role in organizing parental involvement in schools from fundraising drives to uniform sales, information evenings, and working bees. They also take an advocacy role, whether it is keeping parents informed of relevant educational issues or lobbying on local and national issues.

Fundraising is one of the shared activities undertaken by schools and their communities. Not only does this provide funds for specific projects, it helps build a shared identity and sense of purpose. Teachers and parents collaborate for the good of the school and the ultimate benefit of their students.

Parent volunteers play a major role in many aspects of school life. On the educational side, they may act as trained or untrained teacher-aides supporting

teachers, groups, or individual students as required. Class trips, school camps, and other “education outside the classroom” activities require parent and whānau participation to meet health and safety compliance and adult–student ratios. Parents with particular areas of expertise or access to relevant sites can support activities as wide-ranging as enrichment programs or transition-to-work experiences. Schools would be unable to offer the depth and variety of sporting, cultural, and club activities without the long-term commitment of many parent, whānau, or community volunteers.

With increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in New Zealand schools, community links need to be fostered with local *iwi* (tribal groups), Pacific groups, minority language speakers, migrant, and refugee communities. Many schools use parents, whānau, or community groups to help with community consultation, induction of new students, and the translation of school documents and newsletters.

There are many other reasons for schools and parents and whānau to work towards common goals. Students with special learning or behavioral needs, non-attending or disengaged students, students at risk, or students with differing abilities all benefit from enhanced collaboration between schools and parents—and, indeed, other groups and agencies within the wider community. Different school settings (for example, isolated, rural, lower decile, inner city, multicultural, or newly constituted schools) or those with different philosophies (special character, Māori-medium, or alternative schools) also provide opportunities and challenges in ensuring there is shared understanding and collaboration between all members of the school community for the benefit of all students.

Many initiatives have been undertaken to encourage and sustain the involvement of parents, whānau, and communities in schools. Engagement with parents and whānau is one of the Ministry of Education’s priorities across the sectors. To this end, they have implemented a range of initiatives, for example, the Team Up program which uses strategies to increase meaningful partnerships between schools and parents and whānau. *Te Kaubua*, *Te Kotahitanga*, *Te Mana Korero* and *Te Hiringa i te Mahara* are examples of projects that work with whānau and communities to improve the achievement of Māori students.<sup>1</sup> Evaluations of these projects have shown that productive partnerships are resulting in better attendance, behavior, and academic results (see, e.g., Hohepa & Jenkins, 2004). *The Home-School Partnership* strategy and the *Pacific Island School Community Parent Liaison Project* focus on schools with significant Pacific populations. Parents whose first language is other than English are supported by the *Families Learning Together* booklets published in nine different languages. *Better Outcomes for Children* aims to raise achievement and improve

services for children who need special assistance through Group Special Education. Developmental programs such as *Family Start* and *Parents as First Teachers* aim to give parents confidence in supporting their children's learning in the early years. *The Parent Mentoring Initiative* is a project that focuses on building partnerships between teachers and parents, parents and students, and schools and communities. The schools in this project all made progress in reframing home-school relationships and in enhancing parent involvement, collaboration, and teamwork (Gorinski, 2005).

Not all initiatives are initiated by the Ministry of Education. Schools or regions themselves set up projects to enhance student achievement or become involved in established projects; there are many examples of these, especially in areas where schools have struggled with student achievement, engagement, and retention. Other agencies or groups also play their part, for example, the NZ-PTA<sup>2</sup> which has implemented the *Give Me 5* campaign to inform parents how they can become more involved in their children's learning and the life of the school. The School Trustees Association (NZSTA)<sup>3</sup> also works to improve communication with and participation by parents and whānau in school activities.

### **Information Sharing Between Schools and Parents, Whānau, and Communities**

Traditionally, information sharing between schools and parents and whānau has been a one-way flow from schools as they report on student progress, school business, or changes to policy and curriculum. In more recent times, there has been recognition of the importance of reciprocal two-way communication to enhance the understanding of student backgrounds and learning needs; to consult with parents, whānau, and communities on school priorities; and to engage in collaborative goal setting. The changes resulting from the reforms and more recent developments have provided ample opportunity for schools and their communities to engage in fruitful dialogue, whether designing school charters and logos in the 1990s or contributing to school-based and national curriculum priorities in the curriculum consultation rounds in the 2000s.

Schools are still charged with reporting on student progress through the 2001 Education Standards Act and the introduction of clearer planning and reporting targets. In many schools, reporting on student achievement has become more formative and participatory. Schools and centers use strategies such as learning stories, electronic portfolios, school open days, or three-way teacher-parent-student conferences to enhance more formal summative reporting. Such moves have required a greater understanding of learning strategies and assessment practices. Recording and reporting has moved beyond focusing just on individual students to reporting on school-wide patterns and trends and

making better use of data to plan for student learning needs, teaching strategies and resources, and relevant teacher professional development. Schools are also required to gather and interpret data relating to Māori and Pacific student achievement and other determined priorities as requested by agencies such as the Ministry of Education or Education Review Office.

Although throughout New Zealand's history there have been sporadic opportunities for parents, whānau, and communities to express their views on education, such as to the Currie Commission in the 1960s, consultation is now a regular part of everyday school life. Schools conduct surveys, hold focus group interviews, attend *hui* (meetings) on *marae* (tribal meeting places), and canvass opinion from a wide range of stakeholders including, but often going beyond, their immediate communities. Other stakeholders might include the business community, local government, teacher unions, and related educational and social agencies. At a national level, several rounds of consultation usually accompany policy changes. The 1987 curriculum review set this expectation in place and, recently, a further review and subsequent consultation rounds gathered wide-ranging feedback before producing the latest national curriculum.

Technological advances have enabled a swifter flow of communication between schools and homes. Schools have developed websites that provide detailed information and visual representations of a wide range of activities. Schools use their websites for publicity and recruitment; to inform parents and whānau of school policies, events, or achievements; for family and community news; or to engage parent or whānau opinion. Newsletters can be emailed to home computers, and information can be returned to schools, depending on the resources or policies a school has in place. A developing trend is for parents to be able to log on to secure websites to access student scores and information.

## Research Context

### Literature Review

It can be seen that positive relationships between schools, parents, whānau, and communities have a high priority in both policy and practice in New Zealand. The impact of these relationships both on school improvement and student achievement has also been a strong focus of research. Some key findings that are relevant to this project from both New Zealand and overseas research are briefly outlined below.

Research shows that the majority of parents care about their children's education and, with encouragement, will enter into productive partnerships with schools to lift achievement levels (Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein et al., 2002; ERO, 2007b, 2008a; Gorinski &

Fraser, 2006). Effective partnerships between parents, whānau, communities, and schools lead to improved educational, social, and behavioral outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph et al., 2003; Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; de Bonnaire, Fryer, & Simpson-Edwards, 2005a, 2005b; Epstein et al., 2002; ERO, 2007a, 2007b, 2008d, 2008e; Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hohepa & Jenkins, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2006; Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Programs that engage parents and whānau in supporting learning at home are linked to higher student achievement (Biddulph et al., 2003; Caspe, 2003; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; ERO, 2008e; Fullarton, 2002; Redding et al., 2004).

The most effective partnerships are those in which all parties construct and share common visions and goals (Bevan-Brown, 2003; Biddulph et al., 2003; Caspe, 2003; Cooper, 2006; de Bonnaire et al., 2005a, 2005b; ERO, 2007b; Fischer & O'Neill, 2007; Redding et al., 2004). Where parents, whānau, and communities are fully engaged, schools are more likely to be effectively managed (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; ERO, 2007b; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendich, 1999).

Ethnicity, culture, home language, home resources, and maternal education levels are all factors that are linked to student achievement (Epstein et al., 2002; Fullarton, 2002; Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents from economically disadvantaged and/or ethnic minority groups are the least likely to become involved in school activities (Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Humpage, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999). Parents with low involvement are typically from single-parent or large family settings, have low educational attainment, have high mobility rates, lack time and resources, may be young parents, and are most often male (Gorinski, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Hipkins, 2004; Humpage, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999).

Parents and whānau initially become involved in activities that directly affect their own children but can be drawn into wider school activities (Gorinski, 2005; ERO, 2008d; Marjoribanks, 2002; Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriot, & Poskitt, 1993). The extent to which parents become involved is influenced by their own schooling experiences and their perception of the school's culture and willingness to accept their contributions nonjudgementally (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Humpage, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999; Ramsay et al., 1993). Parental involvement in school activities lessens as students progress through the system with formal parent–teacher interviews/conferences still the main form of contact between parents and secondary schools (Beothel, 2004; Ball, 1998; ERO, 2007a; Hipkins, 2004; Wylie, 1999).



School leadership is a strong factor in enabling schools to develop a strong cohesive vision which is central to parent–school partnerships (ERO, 2007a, 2008d, 2008e). Schools that set goals that focus on student achievement and regularly share student data with students, parents, and the wider community are more successful in achieving their goals (Alton-Lee, 2003; ERO, 2007c). Teachers and parents who set high but attainable expectations in a supportive, reflective learning environment increase student success, regardless of students' socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Alton-Lee, 2003; de Bonnaire et al., 2005a, 2005b; ERO, 2007b, 2008a).

Whānau and communities that engage in and support children's learning profoundly shape children's aspirations and expectations (Bevan-Brown, 2003; Cooper, 2006; de Bonnaire et al., 2005a, 2005b; ERO, 2007d, 2008a; Hohepa & Jenkins, 2004; Marjoribanks, 2002). Whānau and communities with strong social networks who make use of community facilities and social agencies increase children's chances of success (Biddulph et al., 2003; ERO, 2007a, 2008e). Parental and whānau involvement also strengthens adult and family literacy and ongoing participation in education and work (Ball, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2006).

Thus, it can be seen how important it is for schools to build relationships with the parents and whānau of their students and for parents, whānau, and communities to engage in the activities of their local schools. Not only does it influence student performance and well-being, it enhances family and community cohesiveness and identity.

### **Contextual Factors**

However, many historical, cultural, social, educational, and political factors influence the ability of schools to develop sound relationships with their communities and vice versa. Historically, parental, whānau, and community involvement in schools has been well embedded in the New Zealand education system, and a broad range of contributions has been made to school life and student learning by parent volunteers, parent–teacher organizations, and community groups. The focus of these contributions has altered over time as the role of parents, whānau, and communities in school administration and decision-making has increased.

Culturally, commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi and the rights of Māori, increasing multiculturalism, and changes in migration patterns have all influenced the type and manner of school engagement. One factor, for example, is the increasing number of parents whose own schooling experiences were outside the New Zealand system.

Socially, changes in family structures; the impacts of social and economic reforms; dislocation from parent, whānau, and community support; and changes in communication due to technological advances have all impacted the ways schools interact with their communities. These days, for example, not all students live in the community in which their school is located.

Educationally, changes to curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment practices have required schools to communicate in different ways and about things that are not always familiar to parents. In order for the best decisions to be made about students' learning needs, there needs to be a reciprocal flow of information between schools and parents and whānau. As a result of the education reforms, parents and whānau have also developed the expectation of having a strong voice in both the education system as a whole and the school that their child attends.

Finally, the political environment and resulting legislative changes impact the relationships between schools and parents and whānau. The role of Boards of Trustees and their obligations as outlined in the *National Education Guidelines*, for example, mandate particular consultation and reporting activities.

As the practice in New Zealand shows, there is a commitment to increasing school–parent/whānau/community partnerships, and there have been many attempts to foster this; however, ERO evaluations and other research findings highlight that there is still some way to go to get consistent, fruitful engagement across the full range of school and community settings.

## **The Engaging With Parents, Whānau, and Communities Project**

### **Methodology**

When this project was conceived, the term “engagement” was defined as meaningful, respectful partnerships between families and schools that focused on improving the educational experiences and successes for the child. This included regular, meaningful contact between schools and their students' parents and whānau resulting in increased parental participation in school activities, enhanced well-being of students, and improved student learning and achievement. Thus, the overarching evaluation question was: To what extent do school practices contribute to meaningful, respectful partnerships with parents, whānau, and the wider school community that have a positive impact on student learning, achievement, and well-being?

In order to answer this question, 233 schools undergoing their regular review cycles in the chosen time period were used as evaluation sites. These schools (180 primary; 53 secondary) represented a mixture of school types and sizes, both urban and rural, and ranged across the decile (socioeconomic) levels.

Four main data gathering strategies were used. The first revolved around using the school as a data source. This included meetings with school personnel, parents, and students; in-class observations; and analysis of school documentation. Over 4,000 parents contributed to school-based meetings or individual face-to-face, phone, or email interviews. The second strategy employed written questionnaires, open to all parents, in both English and *te reo Māori* (the Māori language), available electronically or in hard copy. The 500 parents who completed the questionnaire provided information on their experiences of involvement in school activities and their children's learning; the usefulness, timeliness, and value of information provided to them by the school; and the barriers they perceived to improved parental involvement in their school. In order to tap into groups that are traditionally harder to access, a third strategy of facilitated discussion groups was used; 235 parents from Māori, Pacific, special needs, refugee, migrant, remote, and/or transient families attended 34 discussion groups. The final strategy was to look in more depth at schools that were engaging successfully with their communities. From an initial identification of 52 schools, eight were selected as best practice case studies.

## Findings

The evaluation found that it was not just what the school *did* but the spirit in which it was done that led to successful engagement. The overall conclusions, which resonate with many of the themes in the literature, (such as shared values and beliefs, mutual respect, collaborative approaches, and effective communication) were summarized as:

Engagement between schools and parents, whānau, and communities is strongly influenced by the extent to which school personnel and parents believe in and value partnerships that share responsibility for children's learning and well-being. Developing common understanding and expectations of the benefits of engagement and the challenges involved is integral to successful partnerships.

Engagement worked well when schools had a commitment to working collaboratively with parents, whānau, and communities. Collaborative practices underpinned the development of mutually respectful relationships. Partnerships were developed and extended in a climate of openness and trust and supported by appropriate communication strategies. (ERO, 2008a, p. 14)

The evaluation isolated six factors that are crucial to effective engagement. These are: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication.

## Leadership

The executive summary (ERO, 2008a, p.1) states:

Leadership is crucial in creating meaningful and respectful partnerships. Engagement between schools and their communities works well when there is a vision and commitment from school leaders to working in partnership with all parents.

While the term “leadership” can encompass a range of positions in a school community, the ERO evaluation found that it was most often the principal’s leadership that had the greatest impact on how the school engaged with its parents, whānau, and communities. Here is a description from the best practice report of one principal from a lower decile urban secondary school:

The knowledgeable, committed principal continues to lead by example as he effectively manages a range of initiatives designed to promote and maximise learning outcomes. A feature of his leadership is his ability to foster trusting relationships within the school community. The senior management team is united in support for the school vision and actively promote and model agreed expectations. Leadership roles are available at all levels of the school, with student, staff, and parents having meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making. (ERO, 2008b, p. 19)

The factors that were associated with a successful principal’s engagement echo those in the description above. They included the valuing of respectful communication and engagement, prioritizing engagement as part of the school’s strategic vision and goals, promoting a collaborative and consultative approach to leadership, and providing opportunities for others to take on leadership roles.

In order to achieve a shared set of values, schools needed to undertake broad consultation, engage in culturally appropriate ways, and put effort into drawing in traditionally reticent families and groups. The evaluation found that schools with the most diverse communities had some of the most successful practices for engaging families:

These schools engaged with parents, whānau, and families in ways that bridged cultural, language, and socioeconomic diversity. The strategies they used built relationships, broke down barriers, and gave parents the confidence to become involved in their child’s learning. (ERO, 2008a, p. 3)

It was important for schools to take account of parents’ aspirations for their children and incorporate these into their strategic planning. Schools needed to actively plan to increase engagement through explicit activities. A primary school parent describes one activity, and a secondary school parent another:

I went to a reading evening held by the school. We were shown some good skills and able to buy some learning games—a very friendly, welcoming family-oriented school. From the first day my child started school visits, all the children knew her name and said hello before we even got to the classroom.

Parents of third formers are invited to a picnic tea followed by a chance to meet each of their child's teachers in an informal way in the classroom. This happens early in the year and avoids the situation of getting to mid-year interviews not knowing who the teacher is. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

### Relationships

Successful schools invested time and energy in providing a range of interactive opportunities to build relationships. This included recruiting suitable staff, identifying where the school was not engaging with particular families or groups well, and providing staff with professional learning to enhance their skills in engaging with different communities.

Transition-to-school processes were pivotal in establishing positive relationships. As discussed in the best practice report:

In some schools, the early development of relationships occurred through open days, visits to contributing schools, performances, and community events. Meeting teachers informally at school events, activities, and sports provided opportunities for parents to talk, ask questions, and connect with their children's school lives. Parents enjoyed being involved in non-threatening, social, and student-focused activities, making it easier for relationships to be developed and nurtured. (ERO, 2008b; p. 20)

An example of how one particular urban primary school develops relationships is described below:

Opportunities for parents to be involved socially with the school include coffee mornings held for an hour once a month. The school supports this activity by having activities for the younger children while parents are involved in discussions. Parents come from a wide area. Parents network with each other, getting to know other parents of children in their class in an informal setting. This is particularly good for immigrant parents who are new to the area. (ERO, 2008b, p. 21)

### School Culture

The evaluation found that the key factors associated with a positive school culture were a genuine openness to parent and community involvement, accessibility of school personnel, and practices that were inclusive of diversity. Two

parents outline how this openness, approachability, and respect for diversity is played out in practice:

Our child's teacher is very approachable and knows him well. It is easy to converse over a wide range of topics. His interest in him as a whole person helps identify positive ways to engage him in his learning.

Last term the junior school explored each child's ancestry, history, and culture. The children brought family treasures to school. This created a lot of discussion in our family. Our daughter wrote a story about our family culture. This was displayed on the "excellent work" board outside the school—she was very proud. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

Diverse community groups were asked about the factors that enabled them to feel confident in participating in school life. They identified the relationship with their child's teachers as the key factor. When teachers displayed a willingness to learn about the child's background and showed an interest in the child's particular needs and interests, parents became more confident in becoming engaged with the school. As one Māori parent explained, "I used to walk my children to the gate, but now I come in."

Where there were cultural or language differences, a trusted interpreter, liaison person, or mentor helped overcome barriers to involvement. A group of refugee parents explained their difficulties:

Parents are unsure what schools expect; "there a big gap." It's often very difficult for parents to know who is the right person for them to talk to at a school. It's especially confusing for parents if they have children of different ages and at different schools as each school has different procedures and expectations. (ERO, 2008c, p. 17)

## Relationships

In schools where there was positive engagement, there was a clear expectation that parents and the school worked in partnership to benefit all aspects of a child's development. Parents appreciated timely information about students' learning and achievement and being involved in decisions that might affect their child's learning and well-being. Here two parents of Year 1 students at two different schools outline their very different experiences:

I find the portfolios very helpful so I can see how well he did with each topic. I can then help revise topics that have been difficult for him. Just me showing an interest in what he's been doing at school encourages him to talk and practice things that he really enjoys. (ERO, 2008a, p. 25)

My child has been attending school since November last year (six months), and I have not received any information regarding my child's progress. I have tried approaching teachers, but I just get very brief comments, for example, "she is going good." Other than that I regularly look through her exercise books to see her progress. So I am now at the point that I don't hear anything, so I have to assume she is going well. (ERO, 2008a, p. 43)

Celebrations of student success were important in increasing student pride and motivation especially when parents and whānau were involved. Such celebrations included "achievement breakfasts, award ceremonies, cultural events and performances, festivals of learning, whānau hui, class presentations, art exhibitions, curriculum evenings, and daily communication books" (ERO, 2008a p. 18). Restorative justice (an approach to dealing with serious behavioural issues) was also mentioned as an example of a process that reflected the ideals of a real partnership where the parties worked together for a solution without attributing blame.

### **Community Networks**

Schools that knew their communities well were able to strengthen links with community groups and agencies to benefit students and their families. This was particularly important for building the confidence of parents whose own schooling had not been a positive experience. Activities ranged from seeking the perspectives of their communities to networking with key agencies to promoting formal networks. Here is an example from a low decile rural primary school:

At this school, consultation and feedback to the community about school matters are ongoing. At fortnightly marae hui, the principal shares information, and questions from the community are responded to directly. Teachers are responsive to requests and concerns from parents. The strong links with local kaumatua are a key factor in nurturing the well-being of students and their sense of who they are as young Māori learners. As a result of community cooperation, students readily access comprehensive medical services at a local clinic and through regular school visits from health professionals. (ERO, 2008b, p. 27)

### **Communication**

Good communication strategies and practices play an important part in developing and maintaining relationships. Effective communication needs to be personalized and regular. Parents want honest and easy-to-understand

information, sooner rather than later, that involves them in decision making, is culturally inclusive, and opens up opportunities for them to support their child's learning and development. Here parents talk of differing experiences:

My son was placed in a reading recovery programme without my knowledge last year. A letter came home to inform me of the placement several weeks after he had started the program. I felt left out of the loop about this. (ERO, 2008a, p. 41)

We had some concerns with our child's difficulty comprehending what he was reading. His teacher gave us some wonderful suggestions on what type of questions to ask to encourage him to take in what he reads. This has really helped him improve to the level he is at now. This was a very positive result. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

Homework was a topic that was commonly raised. Parents expected homework to be meaningful, marked promptly, and to contribute to their child's learning. They saw it as a way to support their child to develop an appropriate work ethic. Homework was of concern to many of the parents who attended the discussion groups, particularly Pacific, refugee, and migrant forums—for some it was their inability to help and for others it was dissatisfaction with the amount of homework given. A parent of a transient family explains:

I can help with homework when I know what is expected of my child and me. It helps me to know about what my child is learning and where they are at, and others in the family can get involved and help. (ERO, 2008a, p. 26)

## Conclusion

Thus, the six key factors critical to enhancing and strengthening engagement as discussed in this article are school leadership, school–parent/whānau/community relationships, school culture, learning partnerships, strengthened community networks, and effective communication. They were summarized in the introduction to the best practice report (ERO, 2008b, p. 1) and are provided here in table form (Table 1) as a concise synthesis of the key findings from this evaluation.



Table 1. Key Factors Critical to Strengthening School–Parent Relationships

<u>Leadership</u> : Engagement between schools and their communities works well when there is vision and commitment from school leaders to working in partnership with all parents.
<u>Relationships</u> : Mutual trust and respect are critical to relationships in which staff and parents share responsibility for children’s learning and well-being.
<u>School Culture</u> : A school’s culture reflects the values and attributes that underpin home–school relationships. Schools that are committed to being inclusive enable all parents to be actively involved in decisions affecting their child and respond to parents’ concerns and questions promptly.
<u>Partnerships</u> : Learning partnerships strengthen parents’ understanding and involvement in their child’s education. Parents feel that their contributions are valued. Effective learning partnerships have positive impacts on student outcomes.
<u>Community Networks</u> : Schools are an integral part of their communities. Parents and community expertise contributes to school programs and activities. Networks are built through effective consultation, and there is a shared understanding about priorities for student achievement.
<u>Communication</u> : Timely, useful, and easily understood communication with parents provides opportunities for exchange of information, appropriate for those involved. Barriers to effective communication are actively identified and understood.

As well as the benefit to students, the evaluation was able to determine the benefit to parents, whānau, and communities of well-developed partnerships. These included:

- Being well informed about their child’s learning and about the curriculum, assessment, and teaching programs;
- Having shared expectations for learning and achievement;
- Strengthening relationships with their children and changing their conversations about learning at home;
- Enjoying and celebrating their children’s talents and skills;
- Feeling that they were making a valuable contribution to their children’s learning and to the school;
- Being more confident about coming into the school and approaching the child’s teacher;
- Having opportunities to meet other parents and talking together in a trusting and safe environment;
- Receiving support in their role as parents, families, and whānau; and
- Having a sense of pride and achievement in their child. (ERO 2008a, p. 47)

Where partnerships between schools and the parents, whānau, and communities of their students were working well there was a positive tone to the school and learning time was maximized. The strategic direction of the school benefited from explicit parent, whānau, and community input. There was strong support for learning programs—particularly activities outside the classroom—from parents and whānau, and the school was visible in and connected to the wider community. Teachers felt supported and appreciated, and relationships with a variety of individuals, groups, and organizations were strengthened.

Where the partnerships needed strengthening, parents suggested that schools could start by:

- Improving the timeliness and regularity of feedback and information, especially in relation to children's progress and achievement;
- Providing more opportunities for participation and involvement;
- Supporting and promoting the culture of students through dance, music, sports, and language programs and activities;
- Providing information about how to become involved in the school;
- Offering sufficient time for interviews/conferences;
- Reporting on children's progress in language that can be easily understood;
- Being open and listening to parents' views;
- Finding ways for parents, families, and whānau to lead activities and events, especially for other parents and their children; and
- Having high expectations for all children.

These findings have implications at many levels. At the policy or system level, it is important that rhetoric about family and community engagement is supported by funding to trial programs with potential or to further implement those with successful track records. Resources and personnel are needed to build these important understandings, skills, strategies, and cultural sensitivities into principal preparation programs, teacher professional development, and community relationship-building initiatives. At the community level, schools, education agencies, community organizations, and various configurations of parent/whānau groupings need the time, space, and appropriate support to shape their commitment to genuine partnership into practical and sustainable practices. At the individual family/whānau to school level, greater recognition and valuing of the part that each has to play in this important exercise of nurturing the aspirations and talents of the next generation needs also to be supported by practical, culturally appropriate, effective strategies for reciprocal engagement.

At the time of conducting this evaluation, the schools involved were also undergoing their regular ERO reviews. In these reviews, three quarters of the

individual school reports included recommendations for improving engagement. Some recommendations focused on improving learning partnerships, some focused on improving communication, and others on catering to the diverse nature of their communities, especially Māori and Pacific, or to engage with other groups that might not always be actively involved in school life. This shows that there is still some way to go for partnerships between schools and their parents and whānau to be as strong as possible and for all members of the school's community to become actively engaged in school life. By participating in this national study, however, these 233 schools and their communities have allowed us to gain insights into how to make these relationships more effective in a manner that will lead to enhanced student learning and strengthened community cohesiveness.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The programs mentioned here can be found on various Ministry websites: [www.min-edu.govt.nz](http://www.min-edu.govt.nz); <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/>; [www.tki.org.nz](http://www.tki.org.nz)

<sup>2</sup>See [www.nzpta.org.nz](http://www.nzpta.org.nz)

<sup>3</sup>See [www.nzsta.org.nz](http://www.nzsta.org.nz)

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**Authors' Note:** The Education Review Office conducts individual school, *kura* (Māori-medium schools), and early childhood reviews in all state-funded pre-tertiary institutions. Review Officers are also asked to gather data to contribute to broader evaluations on topics of national interest. Many Review Officers would have contributed to the data gathering for the reports that were summarized for this article, and the authors would like to thank them for their contributions and the Education Review Office for its support.

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