

# Career education:

## Why is successful engagement with parents important?

Parents, guardians and carers still remain the number one influencer of a young person's career decision making. In developing a quality school career education plan, parental engagement in the elements of career advice and information and awareness of various pathways is essential.

So how do schools engage successfully with them to make sure they feel empowered in having a positive and informed influence in their child's career decision making?

Unfortunately, there is no one size fits all approach in answering this question, and engagement strategies for each school will be and should be unique, based on the individual school population.

### How do parents like to engage?

It is vital to understand your parent population and get to know how they like to engage. They may prefer:

- face to face meeting
- receiving and reading information online either via direct email or visiting the school website
- reading a blog
- attending a webinar
- regular articles in newsletters and websites
- using social media i.e. Twitter, Facebook etc.
- offering their services as a guest speaker/employer
- attending career exhibitions / expos
- attending before or after work information/networking sessions
- having an information pack mailed home.

Sophisticated parental engagement strategies have multiple elements in play and attempt to engage parents through a range of methods, thereby increasing their chances of reaching parents at different points in time. Pursuing a multitude of simultaneous channels of engagement is a feature of successful strategies.

### Engaging with difficult to reach parents

All schools are faced with groups of parents who, for a range of reasons, choose not to, or find it difficult to engage with the school. These might include, where appropriate:

- parents who have not had positive school/educational experiences themselves
- parents who have only had negative interaction with the school as a result of their child's behaviour and/or learning
- parents with limited access to information technology
- parents from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds
- parents in remote areas.

Some strategies used by schools in attempting to engage with difficult to reach parents include:

- individual phone calls or an in person visit
- attending gatherings of Indigenous families and working in collaboration with Indigenous liaison staff
- identifying and updating families regarding the work of organisations who provide a range of support services to disadvantaged learners/jobseekers
- linking with other service providers (e.g. transition support) which links students from remote communities with boarding schools
- regular case conferences with parents of students with special needs, organised in liaison with the school psychologist, learning support coordinator and relevant Year coordinator
- letters and newsletters printed in multiple languages for parents from language backgrounds other than English
- holding sessions during the day instead of night for shift workers
- individually addressed communications (hard copies) given personally to students or mailed home



- checking the appropriateness of materials delivered to parents with children who have special needs
- inviting local elders for Indigenous students to come and discuss their career pathway
- provide refreshments and food to get parents to come to the school for after-hours meetings
- begin communication with the parents early and in positive settings, such as school events or parent evenings
- responding to all enquiries within 48 hours, which promotes confidence in the parents as it shows efficiency and dedication to achieving the best outcomes for their child.

Moving beyond newsletters, conventional interviews, information sessions and even workshop-style events seems to be the most common method for reaching difficult to reach parent groups and this is particularly true for Indigenous and parents from language backgrounds other than English in particular.

### What type of engagement and when?

Knowing when to engage with parents in relation to their child's career development journey and the style and type of engagement that is provided by schools is key to its success.

The focus of career development related parental engagement in the later years of schooling has long been the subject of debate by career development theorists, who insist the concept of career development should be extended to earlier stages of child education and development and—by implication—parental engagement strategies targeting those developmental stages. (Watson, M and McMahon, M. (2003) "Children's Career Development: A Research Review from a Learning Perspective." *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 67.2: 119-32.)

Students from preschool to Year 12 have the capacity to understand and engage in building career management competencies.

Students may engage more deeply in learning if they:

- can see how education is connected to a successful future
- connect what they are learning in school to real-world situations

- discover the variety of jobs available to them and be able to imagine themselves in an occupation
- develop work-readiness skills.

Traditionally parents tend to be most engaged during the primary years of their child's schooling. This should be the time when schools start to build positive engagement strategies with parents, involving them in their child's career development journey.

Most of the current literature on effective parental engagement activities insists that while newsletters may be informative they are an adequate strategy for engaging parents.

Effective forms of two-way communication between school and home are central to the successful development of family-school partnerships. Communication needs to change from occasional, one-way and socio-culturally homogenous communication to frequent, two-way and culturally sensitive interaction. It requires much more than informing parents by the school newsletter. (Saulwick Muller Social Research. (2006). "Family-School Partnerships Project: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study." Prepared for the Department of Education, Science and Training.)

Hosting information sessions can be an excellent way of providing parents with information and empowering them to be involved in a positive way as part of their child's career journey, but as international literature argues, creating channels for two-way communication is essential to actively involving and engaging parents, as opposed to merely informing them. (Spry and Graham 2009; Raihani and Gurr; "Parents in Partnership" 2010; Saulwick Muller 2006; Hughes and Thomas 2003.) Information sessions are predominantly one-way exchanges, with teachers/staff as speakers and parents as passive audience.

Raising awareness and the profile of career education, and providing a two-way exchange of information and resources to enhance parents' role within that, is seen as key to the addressing of barriers to engagement.

